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DEATH'S BRIGHT ANGEL
By Lawrence Chandler

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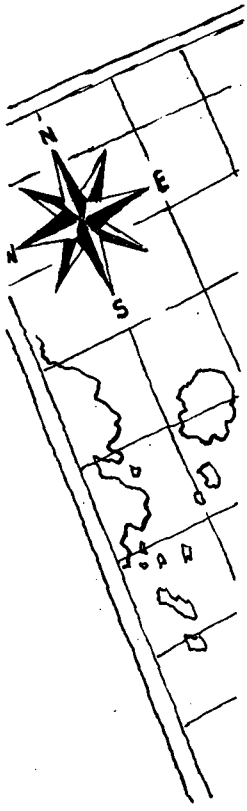
Sneak Preview— DR. SCHPRITZER'S ISLAND

by Vern Fearing



. . . Now the party started moving. Conoway and the girl brought up the rear, walking slowly, letting the others pull away. By the time the others had reached the grotesque blocks and boulders that hid the camp, the air over the waterfall was filled with falling snow.

"Hurry," said Natasha in alarm. "There may be a storm."

But in a moment the storm was upon them. A great wind sprang up, racing across the ice fields toward the water, pushing them back. Conoway took a firm hold on Natasha's hand and led her, stumbling and staggering, back toward the water, looking for the boat.

When they found it, the tarpaulin had been almost torn loose. They pulled it under the boat with them, wrapped themselves in it, and prepared to wait out the storm. The wind howled—the water foamed; inside, all was snug.

When they came forth again, the inky sky was becoming luminous, and a mist had arisen out on the ice field. Conoway ran toward it, his heart pounding. This was what he had been waiting for—what they had told him about.

What lay beyond that mist? . . .

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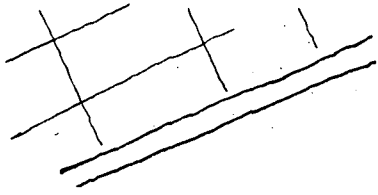

—ON THE NEWSSTANDS MAY 11TH.

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According to you . . .

Sir:

Fantastic is a fairly good magazine, but there is room for improvement. . . . How about serials; I'm all for them myself.

U. S. Army Airforce — DON EMMERSON

● *Serials in a bi-monthly would infuriate most of our readers.—Ed.*

Sir:

Our local bookstore seems to carry almost no science fiction. Is there any way I can get a list of novels of that kind from you, or from anybody else.

Holdredge, Neb. — FREDERICK LEEK

● *Reader Leek's question is representative of many, so we've decided to do something about it. Each issue we shall run advertisements featuring a number of important science-fiction titles, new and old, issued by the leading publishers in the country. We hope that our readers will find this new service helpful and that they will take full advantage of its facilities. See page 33 for further details.—Ed.*

Sir:

I buy both your science-fiction magazines for only one reason: the cartoons. Most of them would grace the pages of any humor magazine in the country. Always in good taste—although some of the satire expressed is on the "biting" side.

Detroit, Mich. — ALEX BAER

Best Story of the Year (1953)

Sir:

If nominations are open for the best story in '53, I want to place "Mother by Protest," by Richard Matheson, on the ballot.

Phoenix, Ariz. — PAUL FRENCH

. . . "The Third Guest," by B. Traven, was the best story published anywhere during 1953. . . .

Anderson, Ind. — AMOS DETWILLER

. . . Richard Matheson as the best author, and "Mad House" as his finest story. . . .

Oak Park, Ill. — LEWIS DOYLE

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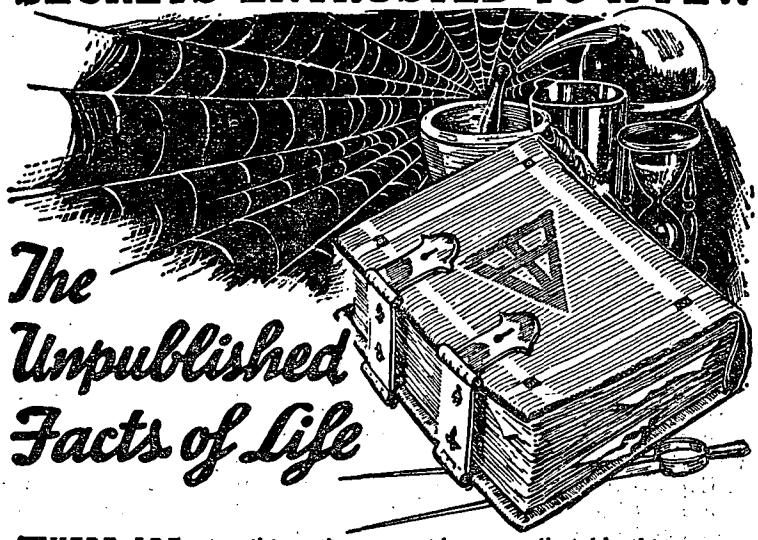
SECRETS ENTRUSTED TO A FEW



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THE CANDLES

By ROBERT K. WHITE

Now this Mr. Rhapsody—he was a hep kid who set Tin Pan Alley on its ear. But how solid was he? No more so, it appeared, than the flame of a candle.

HIS grandfather had been a reasonably famous concert violinist and his father, although not a professional musician, had played oboe for many years with the Philharmonic. It folowed quite naturally that Mr. Rhapsody should be musicallly inclined. But it was a hideous incongruity that instead of being a player of good music he should be a writer of horribly bad music.

Mr. Rhapsody had acquired his title in the offices of Music House Publishing Company. They began to call him by that name at a time when he was something of a joke on the premises—always good for a laugh everytime he brought in his latest composition and attempted to persuade them it should be published.

He lived alone in a rambling brownstone which had been his home since childhood. There, evening upon evening, he would sit at his piano and compose songs. Songs with weird music fitted to lyrics that spoke of death, infidelity or unrequited love. Day after day he would appear at Music House to extoll the virtues of his previous night's effort.

"It's a good song," he would say. "Got plenty of trouble in it."

Brevity being an essential of all things enjoyable he was a joke no longer. Now he had become a usurper of valuable time and from the inner sanctum of George Bentley, master of Music House, came an ultimatum to the effect that the visits would not be tolerated in the future.

Mr. George T. Bentley believed in little beyond what he could see, touch or buy. Everything he looked at had its

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price and more often than not he could pay it. He kept appointments in an aseptic office high above Manhattan, rolled around town in taxis, wore good clothes, got his hair trimmed every ten days, drank good liquor and had an income sufficient to afford the luxury of marriage. There was even a chance the marriage was going to last.

As a part of the high-priced office personnel he had an efficient secretary not given to disobeying orders. But a day came when she entered the inner suite of offices and said, "Mr. Rhapsody is waiting to see you, sir."

Bentley grimaced and threw away a cigar he was about to light when the unpleasant message was relayed.

"I told you to keep him out of here," he said testily.

"I know, sir. But he has a song he's written . . ."

"All the more reason I don't want to see him!"

The secretary was insistent. "Mr. Bentley, I dislike doing what I have been told not to do, but in this instance—well, he has a song I think you should hear."

Bentley's weaknesses were not many but among them was the inability to refuse the reasonable request of a pretty woman. Mr. Rhapsody entered the inner suite, sat at the large piano installed there, and played his composition.

Bentley was first amazed. Then he became enthralled. The fluid perfection of the lovely melody was far superior to any he had previously heard in popular music. Moving to the piano he grasped the sheet of music paper, his thought being to have one of the able writers on the company payroll compose a lyric. The idea vanished when he beheld the words already written by Mr. Rhapsody.

The song was called "This Dear to My Heart," and as Bentley avidly read and reread it, it was like a bit of Milton poetry incomparably welded to music by Brahms. As though holding the last piece of Ming china in existence, he carried the paper to his desk and sat down.

"You . . . you wrote this?" he asked feebly.

Mr. Rhapsody answered with a shy nod of his head.

"Get the gentleman a standard contract," Bentley instructed his secretary. "We'll sign it right now."

The secretary beamed but Mr. Rhapsody was frightened. Then, as he suspected he were to be the victim of a joke, he grew wary. When he realized

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Bentley was sincere it seemed unbelievable.

"You mean you're going to publish it?"

"Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, yes. Of course."

"Then we're going to publish it."

It must have been an extremely dismal world for all who were not named Mr. Rhapsody.

George Bentley prided himself upon being an excellent judge of popular music. And he was. But even he could not have foreseen the phenomenal success of "This Dear to My Heart."

Music House was compelled to order fourteen separate printings as the song led the Hit Parade for ten consecutive and fantastic weeks. Every recording firm hastened to be first on the market with it. Every singer of importance fought to be the first to record it. Every disc jockey then played it at least once each day.

The people on the streets hummed and whistled it quite without knowing why. Except that they liked it as they had rarely before liked a song which was being incessantly dinned in their ears. At dances and in night clubs they asked the band leaders to play it. But then they would seldom dance; only sway a little and hold their partners more closely.

In Minneapolis, Hartford, Sioux City and Pomona, young swains who had been studiously avoiding the tentacles of matrimony heard it and hurried to jewelers in quest of rings. In San Francisco, New York, Ashland and Waycross, husbands and wives of ten years heard it and looked at each other with a tenderness not evident since honeymoon days.

The tremendous appeal held by Mr. Rhapsody's music was amply evidenced in the months following. He wrote "Sleepytime Serenade," a haunting bit which could almost be termed a lullaby, and then a compelling refrain of a broken-hearted lover playing his favorite torch song on a juke box, the latter titled, "A Nickel a Dream." Both were as completely successful as "This Dear to My Heart."

Mr. Rhapsody became the new rage of Tin Pan Alley, but he remained by himself, disdaining both the uptown successes and the Greenwich Village neurotics. He headed the list of writers working exclusively for Music House

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and was becoming moderately wealthy.

He was closeted in Bentley's office one afternoon, checking the latest royalty figures, when Bentley received a telephone call from Max Morris. A Broadway producer of note, Max Morris was then at work on a new musical show.

"Ben," the voice came through the receiver, "I wonder if you could spare your fair-haired boy to do a spot number for my show."

"It might be arranged, Max. If the price is right."

"You know my price is always right," Max Morris said in a manner implying this particular phase to be unworthy of discussion. "What I need is a specialty for Bea. You know . . . something light. Sophisticated. Tried a dozen and can't get what I want."

Bentley considered. "Send me a bit of an outline on the stage action. If he's willing, I'll have him get on it right away."

Max promised delivery of a script within an hour.

Mr. Rhapsody did not minimize the importance of the assignment. He was aware of the possibilities it contained for propelling him to the very top of the popular music field. No longer would he be merely a composer of occasional songs. This would become part of a big-time Broadway production and later, perhaps, they might even accord him the opportunity of writing a complete show.

Bentley raised the piano's keyboard cover. "I would suggest that you begin work on it right away."

"But the type of song," Mr. Rhapsody protested. "You said he'd send an outline of the stage action. How do I know what to write until I've seen it?"

"You won't know any more when you have. How often do the songs in musicals completely fit the story? It's a number for Bea, that's all you need to know. Give her something greater than any she's had before."

"Well . . . if you say so." Mr. Rhapsody approached the piano apprehensively. He sat in deep meditation for some time and then struck a few experimental chords. Presently he was playing a strange and mournful melody.

Bentley stared solemnly at the finished work. Mr. Rhapsody had named it "Place a Stone Upon the Grave of My Tennessee Rose," and it was sophisticated as a farm boy

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on his first visit to the city; light as a ten-ton press descending on a robin's egg.

A little joke? Of course, that was it; a little joke. All right. Bentley would play along. He would graciously engage in checkers until the man was ready for chess. Why, however, an hour of their valuable time should be consumed in perpetrating such an infantile practical joke. . . .

"I'll never know," Bentley thought. "Life can be so difficult for an inquisitive man. There are so many things I'll never know."

"Do you like it?" Mr. Rhapsody asked eagerly.

Bentley felt a strong urge to say, "No, you little bum." Instead, he said, "I can appreciate it. But now let's get serious. I'd like to take that number to Max this evening if you can finish it."

Mr. Rhapsody wavered uncertainly. He looked at Bentley for a long and agonizing moment before returning to the piano.

A second song was composed, much in the same manner. Then a third.

Bentley was perplexed. "This is some of the worst trash you ever wrote. And that includes the stuff you were bringing here up to six months ago."

Mr. Rhapsody slumped wearily into the nearest chair. "I was afraid it was," he said brokenly, while his countenance displayed the guilt of a child whose misdemeanors in connection with the pantry cookie jar were about to be uncovered.

"Mr. Bentley, I've got to be honest with you. I'm a fake. A phony. I can't write a note of decent music without my candles."

Bentley immediately cautioned himself to proceed carefully. Genius, he was aware, sometimes operated in strange and devious ways. And although it posed a problem he was not unduly concerned. His days were full of problems.

"Your candles?" he asked innocently.

"It will be difficult to explain."

"Many things are. Nuclear fission, the Einstein theory, women, war—"

"I'm serious, Mr. Bentley. In order to make you understand I'll have to go back a long way."

"No matter."

And so Mr. Rhapsody told him the story. The story of how his grandfather, when

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the old gentleman's violin playing was the rage of European capitals, once lived in a house which had long ago been occupied by Ludwig von Beethoven. It seemed that many of the original furnishings were still in the dwelling, including a pair of candles on an old-fashioned sideboard in the dining room.

When the grandfather left the house he wanted some sort of memento. He might have chosen from any number of objects—an old music stand, a worn portfolio, a metronome which no longer worked. He selected the pair of candles.

During all of his days in America the grandfather cherished those candles. He kept them in a special, velvet-lined leather case and displayed them proudly to all his friends. When the grandfather died, Mr. Rhapsody's father put the candles in a little closet where were stored a hundred-odd items which had no place in the course of daily living. Upon the father's death Mr. Rhapsody placed all this trivia in the attic.

The composer paused in his narrative to light a cigarette and Bentley noticed that his hand shook as he applied the match.

"One night I was at my piano composing," Mr. Rhapsody went on. "I say 'composing' but it was the worthless sort of junk I did in those days. Anyway, a violent thunderstorm came up and a bolt of lightning hit a nearby power line. It threw our entire block into temporary darkness.

"Now for some unexplained reason I felt an uncontrollable desire to continue working on my music, but I didn't have a flashlight in the house. It was then I remembered those candles in the attic and I figured it was time they were put to practical use.

"I got them, lit one, and began to work by its light. I was acutely aware of trying to concentrate on the music I had been writing before the lights went out, but a wonderful melody was filling the room as my hands played over the keys. I couldn't understand what was happening, but it made no difference at the time. That was the night I wrote 'This Dear to My Heart.' You know the rest."

Bentley remained silent but he was pleased. It was fitting that Mr. Rhapsody had chosen to confide in him, for if George Bentley did not know how to solve human problems such as this then nothing in

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the world was certain. Trouble was a challenge which had never found him wanting. If he should submit then who could persevere? If he became despondent then where would there be anyone to have confidence?

Mr. Rhapsody moved his head sadly from side to side. "Now I'm at this point," he said, "and I've finally had to admit I'm a fraud. I can't compose good music. By myself I am nothing. I think—yes, that's it—I *know* it's really the spirit of Beethoven somehow transferring itself through those candles and into me. I am merely an instrument, like the piano, in bringing forth this beauty."

Bentley brushed the implication aside with a wave of his hand. "My dear fellow," he said lightly. "How can you possibly entertain such an idea?"

"Because everything which you published was written by the light of the candle. Anything else I've tried to do is terrible. You can see for yourself what I composed here this afternoon."

Bentley was unperturbed. Artists, he had found, have peculiar fixations and delicate superstitions. But in due time they discarded them. When it meant money they always discarded them.

Here, now, was this Mr. Rhapsody fellow, possessed of the ability to compose great music. But the talent had asserted itself instantly instead of over a period of months or years. The transformation from nothing to everything had been achieved as easily as Alice's passing through the looking-glass and, like Alice, he had stepped into a strange and new world. When the alien surroundings became familiar he would hear the music as his music. And George Bentley was calm, simultaneously weighing memory and eventuality.

"All right," he said. "Go home and light your candle. But write that song for Max Morris tonight." Then, abruptly possessed by the urge to see these candles for himself, he added, "Would you mind if I came along?"

"Certainly not. I should be delighted to have you."

Bentley liked the old brownstone. It was a good house, an honest house. He was charmed by the tastefully furnished room which Mr. Rhapsody called his studio.

From a desk opposite the piano the composer brought forth the case containing the

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candles and reverently held them out for Bentley's inspection. One was about three-fourths consumed. The other, as yet uncharred by flame, was a slender taper of cream-colored wax, delicately molded and approximately fifteen inches in length. Bentley could do little beyond nod his head. They were, after all, only candles.

Mr. Rhapsody removed the length of used candle from the case. "I'd better get to work," he said.

"It won't annoy you if I sit here?"

"No, not at all."

He first made certain that all the window blinds were tightly drawn then carefully placed the candle in a holder and sat it on the piano. Extinguishing the electric lights he threw the room into darkness and touched a match to the candle.

Bentley recalled that it had been many years since he last sat in a room illuminated solely by candlelight. But it seemed that this candle glowed with a radiance greater than any he had seen before. Its light was clear and unwavering, yet soft as a thankful prayer. It was almost ethereal.

Perhaps the lovely music which Mr. Rhapsody was so effortlessly composing had a great deal to do with his emotions. Perhaps, he thought, it just made the radiance appear as something more than candlelight ought to be.

A subsequent Max Morris production boasted of music in its entirety by Mr. Rhapsody. It was a fine score, said by some critics to be the best ever written for the musical stage. Max matched it with a brilliant book, big-name stars and superb costuming and scenery. The result was one of the greatest musicals ever to play Broadway.

Mr. Rhapsody was the toast of the music world. Rival publishers tried desperately to woo him from Music House and Hollywood made an offer of a staggering sum of money if he would do original music for the movies. Loyal to his friend and benefactor he remained with George Bentley.

Then, approximately eighteen months after his first composition had been published, Mr. Rhapsody came into Bentley's office one morning with a forlorn expression on his face.

"Mr. Bentley," he said simply. "My candles."

Bentley had not given a thought to the candles in months. "What about them?"

"I have only two inches left

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of the last one. Oh, I was most careful. I used them as sparingly as possible, but now they're gone. All except the two-inch stub."

Bentley smiled gently. A small smile full of grave tolerance. "See here," he said with a voice of authority. "This foolishness has gone far enough. Man, you've always had the soul of a great musician. All it needed was a release mechanism. The candles served that purpose, now you are capable of going on by yourself."

"Don't you think I've tried," Mr. Rhapsody said angrily, more to demonstrate that he could still get mad; that he wasn't a spineless weakling. "I'm nothing, I tell you. I'm merely taking credit for what is actually the music of Beethoven!"

Bentley attempted to interrupt but Mr. Rhapsody went on hurriedly. "All my life I've wanted to write great music. Can you understand what that means to me? All my life. And I was only a poor boob knocking out hideous tunes until this happened to me. When it did happen I made the most of it. I wanted glory and fame . . . and now I'm sorry. All the while the acclaim was pouring in I've been huddled in shame in my studio. I wanted to be a king, but the only way I could be a king was by being a thief."

"I see nothing for you to be sorry about," Bentley said. "You've made a lot of money. You stand to make a lot more."

Mr. Rhapsody stared at him coldly. "Should I be happy just because my pain comes in a different package from the other fellow's?"

George Bentley leaned back in his chair and was silent for a few moments. When he spoke again it was with a gentleness not used before.

"Albert," he said, calling him by his given name for the first time in their association, "would you come with me to see a psychiatrist?"

"Why?"

"Well, if you did, and I think you should, I'm sure he'd say you were wrong."

"I'm sure he would," Mr. Rhapsody agreed. "But that won't make it so. There are some things beyond explaining."

"Yes, if you deliberately intend them not to be explained."

Mr. Rhapsody shrugged. "If that's what you want I'll go. I have no objections. But just this once, mind you."

Bentley's diagnosis was cor-

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roborated by the psychiatrist although the doctor dressed up his version with medical phrases and a few embellishments to justify his stupendous fee. It did not, however, alter Mr. Rhapsody's opinion.

Privately the psychiatrist spoke to Bentley. "I would suggest that we attempt to transfer his fixation from one object to another. By proving to him that what is true of one thing is also true of another, we can break it down altogether."

"For example?"

"Oh, let's try a different form of lighting. Nothing bizarre, but something apart from the usual."

Bentley purchased a new ultra-modern type of lamp which sat comfortably on Mr. Rhapsody's piano. It cast a soothing, almost inspirational light but made no difference in the music.

A firm of electrical engineers conducted an exhaustive survey of the studio and installed the most advanced form of indirect lighting. This, too, was useless.

Bentley had the keyboard of the piano fitted with a fluorescent tube that spread a soft golden radiance over the keys while the rest of the room remained in darkness. It availed nothing.

With each passing week he saw his master composer grow thinner. A haunted look came into the once bright eyes and he refused to do any work by the illumination remaining in his two inches of candle.

"As near as I am able to calculate," he said, "there is about an hour's light left in that stub. I'm going to use it to write something worth while. Something that may live on beyond me."

As a last resort Bentley went to a world-famous firm of candlemakers. He placed an order for a dozen candles to be made exactly according to the specifications of the Beethoven tapers. To hold the candles he procured a fine tooled leather case, lined with velvet, and presented them to Mr. Rhapsody. Working by their light the composer wrote the same notes as he had written with his own candles, but the sequence was all wrong.

For many months Music House received nothing from Mr. Rhapsody until the morning when he came in with his famous "Concerto for Two Pianos." It was composed the night before, he said, and the candle stub had sputtered out for the last time just as the final measure of music was being written on paper.

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He watched silently as Bentley pored over the classic composition. Then, as a child might question a parent for important knowledge, he said, "Mr. Bentley, what am I going to do now?"

Bentley had to tell him. Sick at heart with the knowledge the world was about to lose a great talent, Bentley told him, brutally and frankly. The thing he must do—the only thing he could do—was to forever remove from his mind the belief of any magic power contained in the candles.

"But Mr. Bentley, there *was* a magic power in the candles. I know it!"

Bentley sighed audibly. His confidence in himself was shaken. He was about to admit that he had come upon a problem incapable of solution and it pained to make such an admission.

"Then there's little I can do for you," he said. "Except to offer a suggestion."

"Which is?"

"Hollywood's offer is still open. Accept it."

Mr. Rhapsody stared at him blankly.

"Accept it," Bentley repeated. "They don't know you're unable to write anymore. Besides, Hollywood is interested mainly in names. They have any number of bright young fellows out there who'll do passably good work. You take the glory."

"But I couldn't do such a thing!"

"Of course you could. You want to be famous, don't you? Then you've got to get used to being a colossal egotist, selfish to the core."

Mr. Rhapsody pondered silently. After a long time his shoulders straightened and a defiant gleam appeared in his eye.

"All right!" he said. "All right, I'll do it!"

The man with a taste for being a king wanted to remain a king at any cost. Recognizing a sinking dream, he was taking to a lifeboat.

Bentley suddenly felt very tired and helpless. He bent his head and covered his eyes with his hand. It was the end of a dream for him, too, but there was no escape for him. His dream must drown.

For years he had hoped of someday having the world's foremost composer of popular music working exclusively for his company. For eighteen months he did have, but now it was over. Like all miraculous things it had been frail and uncertain. It had been wonderful, though. Eighteen

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months is a long time for a dream to last.

Bentley raised his head and looked earnestly at the composer. "Before you go," he said, "I'd like to know one thing. If someday you find you can write good music again—"

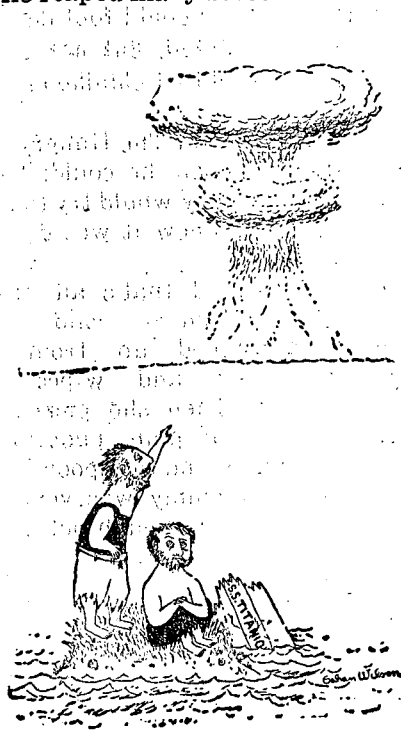
"I'll be back," Mr. Rhapsody promised. "And I'll write it for you."

During the next three years he reaped many screen credits and Bentley often wondered who was actually doing the writing. But Mr. Rhapsody never came back. At the end of the third year he went to an untimely death.

George Bentley flew to Hollywood, to the funeral parlor that looked only a little less confident of its importance than the Taj Mahal, and was shocked to discover that the composer's death left him unmoved. It was better this way, he thought. The insignificant little man who had given the world of music so much, was at last released from his special kind of torment.

In memory of Mr. Rhapsody, George Bentley still keeps in his desk the candles he ordered especially made. Every year, on the anniversary of the composer's death, he lights one. For a man like George Bentley this is a somewhat silly thing to do, and he frankly admits as much to himself.

Nonetheless, he lights a candle every year and he is fascinated as he intently watches it burn. Doing only what it was made to do, it produces light, weak and flickering, uneasy on the eyes and difficult to see by. Not at all like the amazing glow once diffused by the candles of Beethoven. **THE END**



"A signal! We're saved!"

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THE HUNGRY

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

The Hungry was the darndest thing. It could fool the grownups, who didn't believe it existed. But not a baby who lived in the fabulous world of childhood.

THE spoon didn't like it. The spoon didn't like it one bit, having The Hungry in it. But spoons can't do anything.

"Come on, darling, one more spoonful," Mommy said, bending over him in his highchair and smelling nice and warm.

Mommy didn't know that The Hungry was in the spoon. Daddy didn't know either, although it was all his fault. Only Fluffy the cat knew, and she didn't care.

"Oh, darling, eat the lovely plum pudding. You like plum pudding. Come on, baby—"

Resolutely he turned his head and screwed his mouth tight. He liked plum pudding; but now that The Hungry was in the spoon, he couldn't eat. The Hungry would try to hurt him. He knew it would.

"Well, if that's all, that's all," Mommy said. She straightened up from his highchair and wiped his mouth. Then she picked up the jar of plum pudding in one hand, and the spoon in the other. Mommy was very tall and light, although not as tall as Daddy. Daddy wasn't as light as Mommy, though. That's why Mommy was his favorite.

"Jim—would you—"

"No!" Daddy said in an almost-angry voice. He was sitting at his desk, and there

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were all sorts of papers in front of him.

"You haven't even heard what I was going to ask you," Mommy said in her low voice, the voice she used when Daddy talked like that.

The Hungry heard. It grinned, in the spoon, and pushed.

"Oh, darn!" Mommy bent down to pick up the spoon. "Plum pudding on the rug. It comes out, doesn't it?"

"Don't ask me," Daddy muttered, bending over his papers. It was all Daddy's fault. If he hadn't gotten angry at Mommy this morning, The Hungry wouldn't have come. But he did, and The Hungry did. The Hungry always came when someone was angry at someone. That was how it ate.

The Hungry bothered the people downstairs a lot, because they were always shouting at each other. Daddy and Mommy laughed at the people downstairs. But it wasn't funny! Not with The Hungry there!

Mommy carried the spoon into the kitchen, but it was safe now. The Hungry had left it, and was flying slowly around the living room, looking for something to go into. It swirled around a lamp, making it flicker, and he watched it with wide-open, unblinking eyes. Then he began to whimper.

"Oh, Lord," Daddy sighed, looking up from all his papers. "Can't we have a little quiet—even on a Sunday morning?"

"I wonder if he wants another bottle?" Mommy asked herself. But The Hungry had tasted Daddy's anger, and it made him even stronger. He darted across the room, and jumped into Daddy's pen.

Seeing that, he began to shake his highchair and cry in earnest.

"Damn it!" Daddy shouted, and threw down his pen. "A blot. How in hell am I supposed to concentrate with all this racket?"

The Hungry had made Daddy blame it on him, when it was really The Hungry's fault all along. The Hungry was very clever.

"He's only eleven months old," Mommy said in a voice that The Hungry tasted and liked. "I'm sorry his manners don't suit you."

That was the first time Mommy had been angry all morning. She hadn't said anything when Daddy complained about the burnt muffins, even though it hadn't been her fault. The Hungry had made

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the toaster get hot too soon. And she hadn't gotten cross when Daddy accused her of hiding his cigarettes, when it was The Hungry that had pushed them behind the bureau. And when Daddy had been feeling cross because The Hungry was fluttering in front of his newspaper, making it hard to read, and he had told Mommy she wasn't staying within her budget, she hadn't even answered back.

But she was a little angry now.

Daddy was starting to feel sorry for the way he was acting, but The Hungry hurried over and blew his papers off the desk, making believe he was a breeze from the window.

"Everything's going wrong this morning," Daddy said.

"He'll be quiet now," Mommy said, and lifted him up, up, up, and put him on the living room rug.

Daddy picked up his papers, wiped his pen and lighted a cigarette. He got it started, even though The Hungry was trying to blow out the match, and went back to work. But he wasn't feeling nice.

The Hungry knew it, too. The last time The Hungry had come in Mommy had burned her hand on the stove, and The Hungry had eaten the hurt for hours. He had eaten Daddy's sad feeling also. But he was very hungry now, and he wanted to eat even more.

The Hungry jumped into his rubber duck, thinking he wouldn't know. But he knew, and crawled away from it as fast as he could. Fluffy was also on the rug, and she just watched. Fluffy was no friend. She could see The Hungry, but she never paid any attention.

The Hungry jumped into Hansel, nearer him, and he started to cry again.

"Oh, no," Daddy said, and he clenched his hands tightly together.

"This just isn't one of his good days," Mommy said, not looking at Daddy.

"He never seems to have good days when I'm around," Daddy said, which was just what The Hungry wanted him to say.

"It's not that—" Mommy said.

"The hell it isn't," Daddy said. "Shut him up!"

He was crying very loud now, because The Hungry was standing just in front of him, spinning. Mommy picked him up and rocked him.

"There, there," she said.

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"There, there, baby. There's nothing there. It's all right."

But it wasn't! Because he couldn't stop crying now, and Daddy was just as angry as he could be. Quickly The Hungry whirled over and rolled Daddy's cigarette off the ashtray.

"Your cigarette!" Mommy called, and Daddy picked it up. But The Hungry had been blowing on it, and there was a little hole in the rug.

"Can't you even put a cigarette down?" Mommy asked, in her low, cold, very-angry voice.

"Don't criticize me," Daddy said, in *his* low, cold, very-angry voice.

He started to scream as loud as he could, because suddenly he saw what The Hungry was planning.

"We haven't had that rug three months," Mommy said.

"Will you shut him up!" Daddy shouted desperately and suddenly.

Mommy put him on her shoulder and walked him up and down, but he couldn't stop, he just couldn't, because The Hungry was eating all Daddy's anger and planning a big hurt, even worse than the time he hurt Mommy.

"God, I can't stand this place," Daddy shouted. "I can't stand that screaming, drooling child!"

"Then why don't you get out?" Mommy shouted back. She didn't mean it, of course; Daddy didn't either. But they weren't listening to what they were saying.

And Fluffy, on the rug, didn't do a thing. Over Mommy's shoulder he could see Fluffy, even while he cried, and Fluffy just lay there and watched The Hungry out of the corner of her eyes, and didn't care. And that was the saddest part, somehow, after all Daddy had done for Fluffy.

"I'm going out and get a drink!" Daddy shouted. He put down his pen with a bang and slipped on his jacket and walked to the door and opened it. Mommy walked over very slowly, holding him in her arms.

"You don't have to come back, you know," Mommy said, very quietly. Then The Hungry whizzed gaily around the room and dipped over Fluffy—Fluffy snarled and clawed at it—and it streaked out the front door. Fluffy went back to sleep, but The Hungry swept past Daddy and settled in the third step from the top of the landing. That was the step that Daddy said he was going to fix today, because it was so loose

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and wobbly. The Hungry wrapped the step around itself, waiting until Daddy stepped on it.

Why didn't Fluffy do something? But Fluffy didn't care, now that The Hungry wasn't bothering her any longer, even though Daddy always fed her. And Mommy and Daddy couldn't see The Hungry, curled on the third step, waiting for Daddy to step on it. The Hungry would push him, and make sure he wasn't holding on. The Hungry would climb on him as he fell, and make sure he hit hard.

He stopped crying and stared at the third step. The Hungry stared back at him. He stared and stared at The Hungry that wanted to hurt Daddy.

"He's stopped crying," Mommy said.

In spite of his anger, Daddy looked at him. Daddy loved him, even though he didn't seem to sometimes. And Daddy was looking at him now.

"I wonder what he's looking at," Mommy said.

"Kids are like that," Daddy said, in his sorry voice. Sometimes they just stare at nothing."

"Sometimes they cry at nothing, too," Mommy said in her are-you-really-sorry voice.

"I suppose they do," Daddy said in his well-I-was-wrong-voice. He hesitated, then said, "Sorry, Grace."

"It does get on your nerves," Mommy said, and laughed. "Come on in and I'll fix you some lunch."

"O.K." Daddy smiled, and it was a very nice smile. The Hungry wasn't happy, though. Now that Daddy wasn't angry any longer, The Hungry couldn't stay. He melted away, and then he was gone.

"After lunch I'll fix those steps," Daddy said. "Now let's eat."

And as soon as Fluffy heard that she got up and rubbed against Daddy's pants leg, and Daddy bent down and stroked her.

But she hadn't helped! Not at all!

THE END

●

There is some cooperation between wild creatures. The stork and the wolf usually work the same neighborhood.

—Walt Whitman

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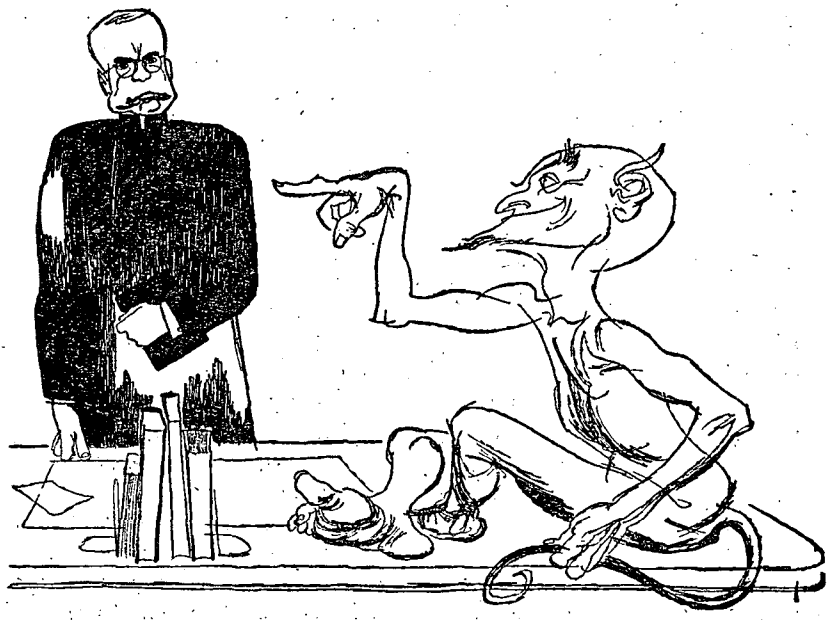

The Vicar and the Devilkin

By J. Munro MacLennan

The vicar did what he had to do because he was an honest, sincere churchman. But so was the devilkin, and all the little fellow wanted was a pass to heaven.

BILL PLUNKETT and Charlie Hames were poaching one night when they caught a devilkin in their rabbit net.

"Crikey!" gasped Bill. He aimed a terrific blow at its head with a net-stake, but the stake took fire and broke into a thousand pieces. One piece hit him on the nose and singed his moustache and made him swear.

"I'd be careful meddling with them things," said Charlie, who had been

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brought up properly—Sunday-school and everything—and knew a devil when he saw one, although this one wasn't much bigger than a rabbit. "It looks like a job for the Vicar."

"You can pick it up by its perishing tail and take it to the Vicar yourself," snorted Bill. He was as angry as any man with a bleeding nose could be.

"That will be unnecessary," said the devilkin. "If one of you will kindly lead the way, I shall be happy to accompany you on the hoof."

The men hesitated. Still, as Charlie pointed out, rabbiting hadn't been too good lately, and there might be ten bob apiece in this. So off they went to the vicarage, the little black devilkin skipping behind.

The Vicar wasn't too happy about being called out of bed in the middle of the night, but his professional ardour kindled when he saw what the men had brought him.

"A unique specimen," he exclaimed. "Certainly worth five shillings. A moment, while I get my purse."

Charlie coughed. "We was thinking of a pound," he demurred. "Not only the value of the animal, but we was in the middle of a business deal when we came across it, and we're losing money."

"I wish you all possible success in your business deal," interrupted the Vicar firmly, "but five shillings is the highest price I could think of giving you."

Bill and Charlie grumbled, but finally settled for seven-and-six. The Vicar led the devilkin into his study where he examined it with the greatest interest.

"May I enquire how long you have been on earth?" he asked politely.

"Only a few hours," replied his visitor. "I've been living down below all my life, but just recently I took to thinking I'd like to go to Heaven. Satan kicked me out for 'subversive tendencies', but of course I couldn't get into Heaven as I am, so I was dumped on earth."

"How terrible for you," murmured the Vicar.

"There's one hope for me," the devilkin went on. "If I grant to a mortal a wish that results in nothing but good and happiness, they'll let me into Heaven. I'm allowed seven chances."

"Why, that's splendid," exclaimed the Vicar. "May I make a suggestion? Why not wish that every human being

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will be good and happy for the rest of his life."

"Can't do," was the reply. "I'm only a little devil, you know. I can handle a small group—as much as a parish, maybe—but not the whole world. Better start with only one or two people."

"I have it," said the Vicar. "I'm due to retire—age, you know—next year. It has been depressing me to think how limited, and how brief, my ability to do good will be in the future. Now, if I were only a young man again—"

"Done!" chortled the devilkin. The Vicar's pajama trousers promptly fell down about his feet.

"Tut, tut!" blushed the Vicar, stooping with ease that surprised him, to recover the garment. To his amazement, he found that he now had to tighten the belt of his pajamas by about four notches to keep them up. Just then his wife came into the study, and the devilkin made a swift leap to the top of a high book-case.

"Henry," the lady began, "what are you—" She screamed. "Henry! You look just as you did when we were first married! What has happened?"

"Er—merely a little rejuvenation, my dear," replied the Vicar uncomfortably. "Quite proper—possibly a little unusual—"

"You mean—you're a young man again?"

"Well, so to speak—"

His wife walked up to him unbelievingly and touched his thick brown hair and smooth cheeks. "What—how—?"

"A friend of mine," gulped the Vicar, wondering if this could be considered a white lie, "a special prescription."

She began to weep. "And we were so happy together! Now you're young, and me with my grey hair, and glasses, and wrinkles, and liver pills—Henry, how could you!"

"Now, now, Martha," soothed her husband, "it's not really so bad. Perhaps this isn't permanent." He gesticulated wildly at the book-case and made a wish under his breath. Immediately his pajama trousers fell off again—this time because his tummy, restored to its former dignified proportions, burst the belt.

A naughty word—the first in sixty years—escaped his lips as he stooped puffingly to restore his attire to respectability. His wife, looking up with tear-filled eyes, blinked and gasped.

"I must be having nightmares!" she gulped. "Do you

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know, Henry, a minute ago I thought you had been turned into a young curate again!"

"How absurd!" The Vicar tried hard to chuckle.

"I don't know. I was just thinking, how wonderful if I could use the same prescription! Oh dear, how depressed I feel now that I'm awake. I can't believe that it was only a dream."

"There, there," said her husband, "go back to bed. "You're all upset, dear."

"But it was so realistic," she persisted. "Why do you look so embarrassed? What has been going on?"

"Go to bed, please, Martha," pleaded the Vicar. "I'll follow in a moment." He ushered her out of the study, and came back looking very worried.

"Obviously I was wrong," he sighed. "I should have wished for youth for Martha too."

"Kindly bear in mind," retorted the devilkin coldly, "that each of your silly wishes is using up one of my chances to go to Heaven. Let that be enough for to-night. I hope you'll have more sense in the morning." And it curled itself up so small that it almost disappeared.

Next morning after breakfast the Vicar entered his study, paused, and glanced sheepishly at the top of the book-case. The devilkin uncurled itself and hopped down.

"I was hoping you were just a bad dream," said the Vicar. "Anyway, I am having nothing further to do with you. Will you please go away?"

"Not until you've completed your seven wishes."

"But I must work on my sermon for next Sunday. I cannot spare any time for you."

"I can wait," replied the devilkin cheekily, and hopped back on the book-case.

The Vicar worked steadily on his sermon for two hours. Then Martha, contrary to his standing instructions, looked in. "Two men insist on seeing you," she announced.

"Well, well, I suppose," he sighed. "Show them in."

Bill Plunkett and Charlie Hames shuffled in.

"Well, what is it?" the Vicar demanded testily.

"We're r u i n e d men," mourned Charlie. "And it's your fault, sir."

"My fault?"

"Yus. After we brought you the little devil last night we went back to our nets, and what was there? Rabbits!"

"Well, what did you ex-

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pect? asked the bewildered Vicar.

"Expect? We expects one or two, but not millions of 'em! Millions! Busted the nets, and still piling up!"

"Indeed. Am I to congratulate you?"

"No, you ain't. All we want is to make an honest bob or two, but can we sell a rabbit to-day? Fat chance! Every rabbit in the country piled in our nets. People coming from all over to cart them away in sackfuls. And us, as they belongs to rightly, can't go within half a mile for fear of getting pinched."

"I don't know what you are talking about," protested the Vicar. "What have I to do with all this?"

"Bill and me was thinking it over," said Charlie meaningly. "What happened last night? Didn't you say 'I wish you all possible success'? Success! If this is success, I'll pack up and go to Australia."

A light dawned on the Vicar. "Oh, indeed! Don't blame me: I was only trying to be helpful. I wish you would take to honest work instead of poaching. Why, big strong men like you could get jobs at gardening or something in half a minute."

Bill and Charlie gaped at him. Suddenly his wife appeared in the doorway. She pointed at the two men. "You, and you. Just the men I want to work in the garden. Get right out there and start weeding the flower-beds. There's enough work there to keep you going for weeks."

"Yes, mum," responded Bill and Charlie in unison, jumping up and hurrying out.

"Martha!" gasped the Vicar, appalled. "You know we cannot afford to employ two men in our garden; two men, I may say, of questionable antecedents."

"Don't be ridiculous. We shall keep them for the rest of the summer," snapped Martha over her shoulder.

"Nice mess you keep making of things," sneered the devilkin, looking down from the book-case. "That's four chances gone."

The Vicar drew himself up stiffly. "Kindly allow me to continue with my sermon preparation."

"Wouldn't it be better to concentrate on getting me to Heaven?" pleaded his guest.

"Certainly not. My work is with human beings, not creatures—if you *are* a creature. My sermon is most important, because I expect a visitation from the Bishop next Sunday. I only wish that all my

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parishioners would turn out to hear it. Oh, my goodness gracious!"

"That wish, at least, should not do any harm," chirped the devilkin. "All right, I'll leave you until next Sunday." With a flick of his tail he disappeared.

The Vicar walked to the window overlooking his flower-garden, and noted gloomily that Bill and Charlie were arguing lengthily (presumably at regular hourly wages) over which should do the spading. He toyed with the idea of going out and giving them the sack, but decided that it might be too risky for more reasons than one. Depressed, he returned to his desk, and soon forgot his troubles in producing a masterpiece of a sermon.

Next Sunday morning he was in the middle of breakfast when the sexton came to the vicarage and demanded to see him on a matter of life and death. "I dunno wot's happened, sir," he panted, "but—"

"Calm yourself, John," said the Vicar, although inwardly he himself was far from calm. "What is the matter?"

"It's the people," stuttered John. "Since early morning—everybody in the parish—crowding in—jam-packed—"

The Vicar had not moved so fast since he had been on his college cricket team; in fact, he was still clutching a piece of toast in his hand when he came in sight of the church and was pulled up short by what he saw. Three queues, each at least a hundred yards long, were converging on the church door. Judging by the strenuous efforts the people at the door were making to squeeze in, the church must already be full to overflowing.

"And that dry-rot in the floors I've been telling you about for years," puffed John, catching up to the Vicar.

There was a resounding crash within the church, accompanied by a chorus of yells and screams. The human current wavered, then reversed its direction. People began to pour out of the church. Fortunately nobody seemed to be seriously hurt, but the two watchers were horrified by the display of black eyes and scratched faces, torn suits and dresses and rumpled coiffures. They took refuge in a doorway to avoid being crushed by the crowd as it stampeded by.

"Wot d'you think brought everybody in the parish to church this morning, sir?" whispered John. "It couldn't be just to hear your sermon!"

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"That is exactly what it was, John," answered the Vicar sadly.

"Poor soul!" muttered John, edging away a little. "Right off his rocker, and no bloomin' wonder!"

When the street cleared, they went to the church door and looked inside. A gruesome sight met their eyes. Under the weight of hundreds of people packed closely together the whole floor had collapsed into the basement. It was a miracle (the Vicar hesitated even to think of the word) that nobody had been killed or maimed; but every splinter of the old woodwork had its shred of cloth or nylon. Hats, scarves and other detachables littered the scene.

"Dear, dear!" lamented the Vicar. "What can I say to the Bishop?"

"Thousands of pounds won't put it to rights again," moaned John.

"And the largest congregation we have ever had!" continued the Vicar, in deepest gloom. "I wish at least they had stayed for the collection."

"Holy cripes!" yelled John, looking out. "Here they come again!"

The Vicar turned, and felt his knees giving way. Like a well-disciplined army, the dispersed congregation had re-formed and was again advancing on the church door in grim and determined columns. For once the Vicar showed commendable presence of mind.

"Here, John!" he commanded, picking up a dented bowler hat and thrusting it into the sexton's hand. "Take up a collection!"

"Absolutely barmy," gasped John. "Stark, staring, raving—" But the Vicar, himself holding a grey felt hat with a footprint on it, pushed him out on the porch. Together, with hats held in front of them, they awaited the onset.

The Vicar's analysis of the situation was correct. As the ranks of the oncoming multitude arrived at the church porch, each individual in them emptied pocket or purse in one of the hats, turned aside, and departed. Not only paper, silver and copper money, but valuables of every kind—keys, pens and pencils, lipsticks, cigarette-lighters, and what not—poured forth in an offertorial orgy such as had never been seen before. As soon as one hat was filled to overflowing it was promptly replaced by an empty hat passed to the Vicar or John from behind, but they were too busy to look round.

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When the last of the crowd had gone, John wiped his brow and turned to see who had been the unknown helper. One glance was enough. With a howl of terror he leaped off the porch and dashed up the street as fast as his ancient legs would carry him.

Left alone, the Vicar and the devilkin glared at each other for a full minute with feelings too deep for words. Finally the devilkin snorted, "Well! So we have had another of your tomfool wishes!"

"How dare you say such a thing to me!" protested the Vicar. "After all the trouble you have brought upon me!"

"*I* brought trouble on *you!*" screamed the devilkin. "You have had six chances to do some good with the wishes I've given you, and of all the dim-witted, fat-headed—"

The Vicar was goaded beyond all human endurance. "You go to—" He remembered his cloth and clapped his hand over his mouth just in time. Suddenly his eyes popped wide and his face radiated enlightenment and joy.

"How stupid I have been!" he exclaimed. "Why, of course, it should have been my very first wish." He smiled down at his companion. "I wish you would go to Heaven," he said slowly and deliberately.

"Oh, thank you, sir, thank you!" cried the devilkin, in a voice rapidly changing from its normal gritty bass to a clear childish treble. Before the Vicar's bemused eyes the black angular body became chubby and pink. The horns and tail vanished, and the ears, no longer pointed, disappeared beneath a flood of golden curls. Pearly buds suddenly appeared on the shoulder-blades and unfolded within a few seconds into shining white wings. A snowy nightgown billowed from the shoulders down to the little rosy

"He finds the strangest friends!"

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feet, much to the Vicar's relief, because he had not realised until this moment that the devilkin had been as naked as any wild animal. And presently he was standing beside as charming a little cherub as anyone could wish to see.

The cherub stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on the Vicar's plump cheek. "Good-bye, you lovely man, good-bye!" it sang, continuing to float up towards the ceiling.

"Wait a minute!" shouted the Vicar. "I shall be most unhappy," he continued firmly, (the cherub paused as if frozen in mid-air) "if you leave without repairing the damage done by my, ah, misguided wishes."

"Oh dear," sighed the cherub. "I'm not sure whether correcting a mistake counts as a new wish or not: I'll try on the church first and see what happens." Suddenly the church floor was whole again, all the furnishings from pews to hymnbooks were back in place and everything was spick and span.

"Splendid!" applauded the Vicar. "Now have all those hats and things returned to their rightful owners. While you are about it, please mend all the torn clothing and heal the bruises and scratches that the congregation suffered this morning." The cherub nodded. "And send those two idiots Martha hired as gardeners back to their poaching. Oh, and one last thing—how am I to explain to the Bishop all the remarkable happenings during the past week?"

"Don't worry," cooed the cherub. "Nobody but yourself will remember anything about them." With a farewell wave of the hand it continued its flight, and seemed to blend and vanish into the angel-choir in the Mullins Memorial Window . . .

"Good morning, sir!" John's voice, from the doorway, broke in on the silence. "My, you're down early this morning. I'm not surprised. I always says, more people would come to church if they knew how quiet and peaceful-like it is on a Sunday morning, with the sun shining through them stained-glass windows. You know, sir," he rambled on, 'when the sun hits the Mullins Memorial Window, like now, I could almost think that little cherub in the corner is winking at me."

"Now you mention it, I think so too," agreed the Vicar. And for the first time in several days, he smiled contentedly.

THE END

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THE CURIOUS CHILD

By RICHARD MATHESON

First, he forgot where he parked his car. Then his memory really started playing tricks — until he said: "Who am I—I never heard of a man named Robert Graham!"

LATE afternoon. An ordinary day, no different from a hundred other days. Sunlight was bronzing Jersey-facing windows, traffic herds were bleating in the streets, multitude heels clicked busily on the streets. Midtown offices were lethargic with waning labors. Five o'clock approaching on another day. In a few minutes the rush for subways, buses, taxis—in a few minutes, the great exodus.

Robert Graham sat at his

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desk finishing up a few last details, his pencil marking slowly across the sheets of paper. Finishing, he glanced up at the clock. Almost time to quit. He got up with a grunt and stretched slowly, exchanging a smile with the girl across the way. Then he went to the washroom and cleaned up, buttoned his collar and adjusted his tie, combed his dark hair into place. Everyone was getting ready to leave as clock hands stood seconds short of spelling five o'clock.

Back in the office, Robert Graham made a final check on his work. Then it was five and, dropping the papers into the basket labeled OUT, he moved for the coat rack. With wearied motions he slipped on his jacket and dropped the hat on his head. Another day ended. Now for the drive home, dinner, an evening at home—maybe television or a bridge game with the Olivers.

Robert Graham moved slowly down the hall toward people clustered around the elevator doors. He had to wait for two loads to go down before he got a place. Then he backed himself into the hot, crowded cubicle, the doors slid shut and he felt the floor drop beneath him.

As he descended he tried to remember what Lucille had asked him to pick up on the way home from work. Cinnamon? Pepper? Chives? He shook his head slowly. Lucille had told him to make a list but he'd refused. Lucille always told him to make a list and he always refused and always forgot later what it was he was supposed to get. Memory was an irksome thing.

The elevator doors slid open and he moved casually through the crowded lobby and out into the street.

Where it began.

My God, he thought, now where did I park the car? For a moment he felt vague amusement at the prospect of crumbling memory. Then he frowned and tried to remember.

There were several places he might have parked it that morning. There was one place right across from the building but a delivery truck had gotten there before he did. He hadn't had the time to wait and see if the truck were only going to be parked there a few moments so he'd driven on and turned right at the corner.

In the next block a woman in a yellow Pontiac had backed into an opening seconds

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before he could reach it. A few cars down there had been another spot but, stopping to let two women cross the street, he'd missed that one too.

But these thoughts weren't helping any. He still didn't remember where he was parked. He stopped walking and stood indecisively on the sidewalk, irritated by this ridiculous forgetfulness. He knew very well he was parked within a block or two of the building. Let's see, was it in that parking lot near the restaurant he ate lunch in—35 cents an hour—75 cents maximum—was it there?

No, not there. He felt sure of that.

A woman sagging under the weight of bundles collided with him. Robert Graham begged her pardon and moved against the building to get out of the way of traffic. He stood there peevishly trying to remember where he'd parked his car.

Well, this is *absurd,* he thought angrily. But anger didn't help; he still couldn't remember. His fingers twitched irritably. Come on, will you?—he asked himself. How many places were there he could have parked? Not many.

It was probably in front of the flower shop, he decided then. He often parked there.

He stepped away from the building impatiently and walked quickly to the corner where he turned right onto 22nd Street. He felt a trifle uneasy about not remembering where the car was parked. It was a small lapse, yes, but disconcerting when it came without any warning. He walked faster, feeling an unaccountable tenseness rising in his body.

The car wasn't in front of the flower shop.

He stood there looking blankly at the place where he usually parked. In his mind he visualized the green Ford standing at the curb, the whitewall tires, the—

The vision broke, it flowed apart and, abruptly, he found himself visualizing a blue Chevrolet standing there. He blinked once, his mind tripping over itself in confusion. His car was a green Ford, 1954 model. He didn't own that blue Chevrolet any more . . .

. . . did he?

Robert Graham felt his heart throbbing strangely, unnaturally, like a drum in a hollow room. What in God's name was wrong? First he forgot where he'd parked the

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car and now he didn't even seem sure what his car looked like. 1954 Ford, 1949 Chevrolet . . .

Suddenly, running through his mind were pictures of all the cars he'd ever owned from the air-cooled Franklin in 1932 to the '54 Ford. None of it made sense. It was as if the years were twisting over themselves, joining together past and present. 1947—the Plymouth, 1938—the Pontiac, 1945—Chevrolet, 1935 . . .

He stiffened with nervous impatience. This is ridiculous! He heard the words spilling across his aroused mind. I'm 37 years old, this is 1954 and I own a green Ford. He felt offended at this jumbled hodge-podge of memories, this mixture of the contemporary with the forgotten. Yes, it was *very* ridiculous when a man couldn't even remember where he'd parked his car. It was like a stupid dream. Yet it was more than that and, suddenly, he realized it.

It was frightening too.

A small thing really; just a parked car. But the car was part of his existence and that part had lost definition and that was frightening.

Enough, he told himself, let's get this thing straight. Where the hell am I parked? It was near there because he'd gotten to work on time and yet he hadn't reached downtown until a quarter of nine. *Chevrolet, Plymouth, Pontiac, Chevrolet, Dodge* . . . he ignored the car names streaming away in his mind. Where am I parked? Is it—

The thought broke off suddenly. Robert Graham stood rigid, an island in the tide of moving people, a look of stricken wonder on his face.

Since when did he own a car?

Muscle cords tensed, he stared at the curb with frightened eyes. What is it—oh, my God, *what is it?* Something fleeing from his mind, a knowledge severed and fading away, drifting . . .

Robert Graham relaxed and looked around him. Good Lord, what am I standing *here* for, he thought, I have to get home.

And he started for the subway.

Now what was it Lucille wanted? Cinnamon? Coffee? Paprika? God damn, why couldn't he remember? Well, never mind, he'd remember on the way home. He hurried around the corner, stopping to pick up the evening paper at the newsstand.

It was when he reached the entrance steps to the subway

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that he stopped again. He stood there while people pushed by him and clattered down into the dim passage.

Local to 14th Street—his mind was reciting—Brighton Express to—

But he lived in Manhattan.

Wait a minute now, wait—his mind hastened to prevent the return of that tight, restless feeling. 568 West 87th Street, that was where he lived. What was this nonsense about the Brighton Express? He started down the steps. That was where he used to live, in Brooklyn. 222 East 7th Street. But he didn't live there any . . .

He stopped again at the bottom of the steps, backing against the white-tiled wall with a confused look on his face. He lived in Brooklyn didn't he?—the little house near Prospect Park? He felt the muscles of his face tightening and felt breath rising shakily from his lungs. What is going on?—the question came feebly in his mind—what's the matter with me?

His head snapped around suddenly. What am I doing *here* when I own a car?—he thought confusedly.

A car? His cheek twitched. He didn't own a car. He—

Robert Graham started moving slowly, nervously down the passage. Manhattan, he was telling himself, I live in upper Manhattan, 568 West 87th Street, apartment 3-C. No, I don't, I live in Brooklyn at—5698 Manhill Avenue, Queens.

Queens! For God's sake he and Lucille hadn't lived in Queens for fifteen years!

57 Pine Drive, Allendale, New Jersey. Robert Graham stiffened, feeling a hot tightness in his stomach. His eyes moved dumbly around the murky passage, looking at the people who moved by him quickly, heading for the turnstiles. He stared at the sign next to him that showed a pink rhinocerus balancing on his horn a loaf of Feldman's Pumpernickel—*Fresher Than Tomorrow!* And his dazed mind struggled to catch hold of something rooted and immovable.

But addresses flowed across his mind in a bubbling current of numbers, streets, cities, states—Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, New Jersey—*No, for God's sake, he'd left Jersey when he was seventeen!*—5698 Manhill Avenue, 1902 Bedford Avenue, 57 Pine Drive, 3360 East 75th Street—

The Sheepshead Orphan Home.

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Robert Graham shuddered. It had been months since he'd thought of the orphan home where he'd spent seven years. He swallowed convulsively and realized that sweat was trickling down his temples, realized that he was still standing tensely in the subway passage, the newspaper clutched in his shaking hand while people rushed and jostled past his motionless form.

He closed his eyes and shuddered uncontrollably. All right, all right, he thought quickly, maybe I've been working too hard. The mind was a tricky mechanism after all—it could break down when you least expected it.

With trembling fingers he removed the wallet from his back trouser pocket. If I can't remember, he steadied himself, then I'll find the address on an identification card, that's all. I'll get home quickly, calmly and then I'll call Doctor Wolfe and—

Robert Graham stared at the driver's license in his wallet.

An almost inaudible whimper sounded in his throat. But I don't *have* a car, he heard his mind claiming, I don't—

His fingers twitched and the wallet fell to the concrete floor. Quickly, nervously, he bent over and picked it up. I'm sick, he thought, I'm *sick*, I have to get home right away. His eyes moved over the driver's license. 222 *E. 7th Street, Brooklyn* 18, *N. Y.* He hurried down the passage, slipping the wallet into his coat pocket.

Something stopped him before the turnstiles—a twitch of memory, a stab of recollection—something about a failure to send change of address to the motor vehicle bureau; something about well-known furniture in an uptown Manhattan apartment, Lucille making supper and—

"Pardon it, mister, will you let me pass, please?" A young woman's irritated voice. Robert Graham backed quickly from the turnstile and moved against the tile wall again, a trickle of ice water down his back.

I don't know where I live.

He admitted it, confessed it to himself. I know all the places I've lived in all my life but I can't remember which one I live in *now*. It was insane but there it was. He remembered the apartment on 87th Street, and the little house in Brooklyn and the apartment in Queens and the bungalow on Staten Island and—

He felt dizzy standing there—dizzy and afraid. He want-

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ed to grab someone and ask them to take him home, he wanted to tell them he was forgetting everything and they had to help him.

He took out the wallet again and opened it with shaking fingers. Social security number—128-16-5629—*Robert Graham.* That didn't help. A man knew his own name. But what about where he lived?

His library card—*Queens Public Library.* But he didn't live in Queens any more! He should have thrown that card away—it was long expired. Damn! His chest lurched and shuddered in with a gasp. What was happening to him? Nothing made sense. You left work on an ordinary Thursday afternoon and you—

Oh, no.

He forced together his shaking lips. Thursday, it was Thursday. *Wasn't it?* His jaw sagged and he pulled it up tight as though he were suddenly afraid that his body were starting to come apart too. He stood shivering and sick-eyed in the dim passage looking at people push through the turnstiles, hearing the endless snap of the heavy wooden spokes as they turned.

What day is it? He had to face the question. It was Monday. He and Lucille had gone to the park yesterday and rowed around the lake. No, that wasn't right because he remembered settling that Barton-Dozier contract yesterday.

There was a clicking in his throat. He started away from the cool wall, then sank back, the wallet still clutched in his fingers. Thursday, he told himself with the stiffness of rigid will—it's Thursday, Thursday, *Thursday!* I left the offices of . . . of—

Oh, my God in heaven, who did he work for!

Again he started forward as if he were about to break into a terrified run. But he stopped with a trembling of legs and didn't know whether to go forward or backward or stay as he was.

Automatically, without even being conscious of it, he took a nickel from his trouser pocket and tried to put it into the turnstile slot.

Someone was crowding behind him. "What's the matter, bud?" Robert Graham heard the man say.

"This—this nickel," he said, "It doesn't go in."

The man stared at him a moment. Then his cheeks puffed out in repressed laugh-

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ter. "*Jeez,*" he said, "A nickel yet. Where *you* been?"

Robert Graham stared at the man, something cold and frightening pushing up from his stomach. Then, abruptly, he brushed past the man with a breathless grunt.

He stopped by the wall and looked back, his chest rising and falling jerkily with strained breaths. I don't know what I'm doing—he thought with a sense of absolute dread in him—I don't know where I'm going or where I live or who I work for. I don't even know what day it is! He felt sweat breaking out on his face and as he reached for his handkerchief he saw—

The newspaper! He held it up quickly and unfolded it.

Wednesday. A shuddering breath of relief emptied his lungs. There . . . there—at least there was something; something solid to hold onto. Wednesday. It was Wednesday. His throat moved convulsively. Thank God I know *that* much anyway.

He wiped away sweat. All right, he braced himself, something's happened to my mind. I have to get home and get proper care. Look in the wallet, there's got to be something with my address on it—a book club card, my draft card, my medical insurance card, my—

The paper fluttered down to the floor as Robert Graham's hands slapped frantically at his pockets. His fingers fled about his clothes and whimpering sounds filled his throat. No—oh, God, *no!*

"I dropped it."

He said it aloud in a tight voice, suddenly refusing to let panic overwhelm him. I dropped it. Probably over by the turnstile. I was holding too many things in my hands—the paper, the nickel, the wallet. I dropped it. I'll go and find it now.

He walked slowly and rigidly down the passage, eyes moving over the floor that was dotted with blackened gum blobs and littered with candy wrappers, crushed soft-drink cups, newspaper scraps and torn open, flattened cigarette butts.

There was no wallet on the floor and there was no wallet near the turnstile.

He pressed one trembling hand to his cheek. No, no, this wasn't real, he assured himself, it was a dream, a crazy, distorted dream. He wandered about dazedly through the milling ranks of commuters, looking at the floor, searching for his wallet.

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Maybe somebody picked it up—he suddenly thought.

"Pardon me," he said to the man in the change booth.

The man looked up with hurried annoyance and the people behind Robert Graham pressed their lips together with irritation.

"Well, what *is* it?" the man asked.

"Did someone leave a wallet here?" Robert Graham asked him, "I—"

"No—no wallet."

Robert Graham stared blankly at him.

"Mister, there's a lot of people waiting for change," the man said impatiently.

Robert Graham turned away and stumbled across the passage, breath faltering through his nostrils. He felt as if he were going to cry and he bit his lower lip. No, no, it wasn't true. He looked around with shocked, uncomprehending eyes. Everything seemed to be drifting away, existence clouding, his life obscured in a mist of riven memory.

"No!"

People stared at the taut-faced man who spoke the word so loudly as he stood in their hurrying midst.

No, this was absurd! This was the *world,* this was *life,* everyday life in 1954! He wasn't insane, he was as rational as the next man and he was going to get home fast.

Pretending he wasn't palsied with breaking nerves, he walked quickly back the passage toward the row of telephone booths against one side. All right, I can't remember where I live. I'll get the address from the directory. I'll look through every one. There can't be that many Robert—

Robert—

He stopped abruptly, paralyzed with fear. People hurried by him, rushing to their homes—people who knew where their homes were. People who knew their own last names.

"This is—"

Ridiculous? His hoarse, breathless voice couldn't finish the sentence. It *wasn't* ridiculous. It was terrifying, it was a sudden, complete horror in his life. His mind was going, it was going! He had to get home to, to, to—

Oh, my God!

Three women shied away from the trembling man who stood in the middle of the passage whimpering. They looked back at him curiously as they hurried by.

He shoved through the crowd frenziedly. "I have to get help," he kept muttering, "I have to get—"

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There seemed to be a strange cloud moving down the passage with the approaching people. They didn't seem to see it, even though they were unable to walk right through it.

But he saw it. And a gagging cry started in his throat as he turned and staggered back down the passage on weakening legs. I don't know who I am—the words kept stabbing at him as he tried to escape—I don't know who I am! He turned and looked back over his shoulder. The cloud was drawing closer rapidly, it was only a few feet from him. He whirled.

The man screamed.

Then night flooded over him—night broken by spurts of light that were like fish in a dark lake, half seen as flashes of shimmering movement. He thought he saw a strange face. He thought he heard someone say,

"Come along now."

Then he collapsed. Then blackness swirled into his brain and he forgot everything.

He lay staring as the man talked to him, a strange hairless man in a glistening tunic.

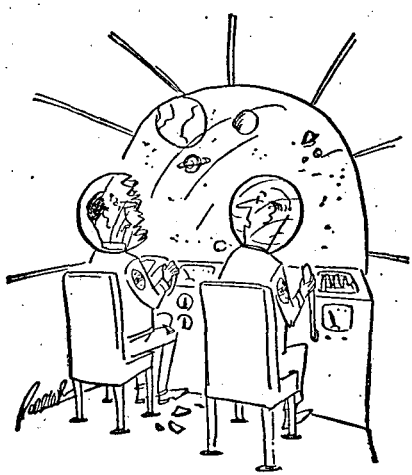
"We've been looking for you a long time," the man said, "You see when you were a child of two living with your father, who was a scientist, you went into a time screen, out of curiosity, and accidentally set it into motion.

"We knew you'd gone back to 1919 but we didn't know *where* you'd gone. It was a hard search. But now you're back.

"We're sorry it was such a frightening experience but there was nothing we could do. You see, the closer we got to you the more your past and present was jumbled in your mind until, as we reached you, you lost hold of everything."

The man smiled thinly as Robert looked out dazedly at the strange, glittering city.

"You belong here," said the man, "Welcome." **THE END**



"Gesundheit!"

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DEATH'S BRIGHT ANGEL

By LAWRENCE CHANDLER

There was no reason for Candy to go to the amusement park in the first place. But it was entirely absurd that Uncle Amos would be there too. All this could be only a prologue to horror!

THE lights blazed up from Golden Hill Park. Lights of so many dazzling, whirling colors that they confused and bewildered Candy. She walked slowly in the gate and as she stood in the big Midway, she asked herself: *What am I doing here? Why did I come? There must be a reason. I wouldn't come, all alone, to an amusement park if there wasn't a reason for it. Why am I here and where did I come from?*

She had the answer to the last question. She'd been walking home from her appointment with Dr. Rinnel—had gotten within a block of her apartment, and had then hailed a cab and given the amusement park as her destination. But in heaven's name—why?

She put her hand against a post for support, closed her eyes, and tried to remember. There had been something horrible—something terrible and frightening just before . . . just before . . .

The horror. What had it been? Somehow, she knew she had to remember what terrible thing had happened just before she hailed the cab. She stood there, trying to remember, while the cacophony of the park in a holiday spirit assailed her ears. It was carnival night and all the happy revelers were parading past her in the gay costumes and grotesque masks. A hand reached out from the conga line that snaked along in

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front of her. The hand grasped her sleeve and tried to pull her into the line. "Come on, baby. Get hip. Come on in and swing it!"

Candy pulled back, suddenly frightened. "Leave me alone! Leave me—"

Then the line was gone. The gay dancer behind the mask had forgotten her.

Candy shivered and began walking slowly down the Midway. The terrible thing. Oh, yes! She remembered now. The beating. The horrible beating Uncle Amos had given her. Uncle Amos—standing over her with the leather strap—lashing it down on her body while she screamed and pleaded—promised to do anything he wanted in the future if he would only stop cutting her flesh with that heavy belt.

That was the terrible thing all right—the thing she knew she had to remember—that Dr. Rinnel had brought out of her mind after so many visits—but why had it caused her to come to the carnival? The dead girl lying all bleeding and twisted before her? What dead girl? Candy trembled. There wasn't any dead girl, really. She was just one of the ghastly hallucinations that came in the night and made her life a continuing terror. But Dr. Rinnel was going to change all that. Of course he was. He was going to cure the hallucinations—protect her from Uncle Amos—bring a little sanity and happiness back into her life.

The thought was comforting. It warmed her and the trembling ceased. For a moment she was undisturbed; almost happy, as some of the carnival spirit began seeping through her dark mood. Another hand reached for her. She laughed. Then—

"And I know that death's bright angel—"

The words came soft and clear into her mind. She jerked away from the reaching hand. She turned and fled.

Death's bright angel. The warm, rich tones of the voice singing it beautifully, but making it all the more frightening in so doing. Death's bright angel. Words from an old song haunting her nights and days—coming out of the years from somewhere. But why? Another of the hallucinations Dr. Rinnel was trying to drive away forever? Those few words of a haunting song that had somehow become a part of her life.

Then, quite suddenly, all the mental anguish was gone. Candy's nerves ceased their screaming, her pulse slipped

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back to normal, and the fears were gone. She smiled. How foolish to get so upset. And over nothing. She'd come to the park for a little relaxation —that was all. She'd come to absorb some of the color and happiness and to be gay. Her smile deepened. Perhaps she would meet someone. Not just anyone. Not a pickup in that sense of the word. But there were nice young men who were lonely also, no doubt. Someone with whom Candy could laugh and be gay.

There for instance. Already someone had seen her and was paying her attention. A slim reveler in a Puck mask with a tremendously long, hooked nose. The reveler stopped in front of Candy and cocked his head at a grotesque and inquiring angle. A young man of course, Candy knew there would be a handsome, smiling face behind the mask. And she knew what the young man was saying:

Hello there. I'm young and you're very young and pretty and I like you and I'm sure you will like me. Let's laugh and dance together and pass the hours.

Candy laughed. The reveler held out his hand. Candy extended her own. Then Puck Face bowed gallantly, whirled Candy around and drew her out of the stream of traffic in the comparative shadow of an empty concession-front. Then his hand gripped hard—like steel and he raised his mask.

Uncle Amos.

His cold, black eyes were staring down into hers. As she opened her mouth to scream, his hand came up and covered it. He smiled his cold, icy smile. "I'm going to kill you, child. You know that don't you? That's why I brought you out here. We'll take a ride on a high roller coaster. When we get to the top—just a little shove—a little push, and down you'll go. Down on the ground to be smashed. Won't that be jolly?"

His hand slipped away from her mouth and she could speak. "Please, Uncle Amos! Please. Let me go."

"I'll never let you go. Not until you're dead."

"You can't," Candy cried. Then, from desperation and animal fright, her voice stiffened. "You can't. I won't let you. I'll go to the police. They'll protect me from you."

He laughed. Do you think the police are as strong as death's bright angel? You're doomed, Candy—doomed."

She jerked away from him and ran—lost herself in the

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crowd and then came out on the other side of the crowd streaming down the Midway. She turned. The leering Puck Face was right behind her.

Then there was an unmasked face directly in front of her; a blessed blue uniform; a wonderful, deep voice:

"Now there, Miss! And what's wrong with you? Some masher been bothering you?"

Candy flung herself against the policeman in an agony of gratitude. "That man. He's my uncle! My Uncle Amos. He's going to kill me."

The policeman scowled. "Well here now. That certainly won't do." He wasn't the kind of a policeman to stand talking things over too long. With one protective arm around Candy, he reached out and got Puck Face by the wrist. "Come here, you! What kind of a business is this? Get that mask off and let's have a look at you."

Candy didn't think she could bear to look at that cold, leering face. She turned away. There was a moment of silence—a moment that lasted too long.

Then, the quizzical, half-amused voice of the policeman. "I say now, Miss. And is this your Uncle Amos?"

Candy turned to look into the face of a very handsome, very blonde young man—not a day more than eighteen; a very scared young man who hadn't come to Golden Hill Park to be grabbed by a policeman. He stammered, "What's—what's the matter?"

The policeman looked at Candy. "Is this the man? He doesn't look like anybody's uncle to me."

Candy was staggered. "No. That isn't Uncle Amos."

"Well, I should think not." The policeman looked at Candy closely. "You haven't had yourself a little drink have you?"

"No. I don't drink. But I'm not lying to you. My Uncle Amos was here—wearing a mask like that one. He said he was going to kill me!"

"Why would a loving uncle want to kill a pretty girl like you?" The policeman smiled, but seemed puzzled nonetheless.

"He almost killed me once—oh—!" Candy buried her face in her hands, then looked up. "Dr. Rinnel would be able to explain it better."

"Dr. Rinnel?" The policeman asked the question sharply.

"He's my—my doctor. He's treating me." Then Candy's face fell. "But even he wouldn't be able to explain why

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Uncle Amos came here—or why he wanted to kill me—"

The policeman shrugged. "A man comes to a place for reasons of his own. If your uncle is here, wearing a mask, the thing to do is find him and ask him what the pitch is."

"I'm sure he wouldn't tell you."

The policeman scowled. "Well now, I just bet he would if we put our minds to making him. The law can be pretty persuasive at times." The policeman seemed bent on calming Candy down more so than anything else.

But he didn't succeed. Suddenly, she was crying, hysteria interlaced with her sobs. "Oh, there's so much more to it! There's death's bright angel—and there's the girl all bloody and twisted on the floor."

The policeman put his arm around Candy's shoulders. "Now you just calm down, Miss. We'll go and talk to some people—you and I. We'll find this uncle of yours—"

"You can't find him," Candy sobbed. "Even if he is here, you can't find him."

"And why not?"

"Because he died five years ago."

Candy was calm now. There had been a man in white standing over her and a sharp sting in her arm and then the hysteria had gone away. She was not drowsy, but very calm, and the world seemed to slide by like syrup.

There was another man—very good looking, in a serious way—who sat and talked to her in a firm, gentle voice. "I'm William Harrison, Candy," he had said, and it's very nice to know you. I'm a detective on the homicide squad. Could we talk for a few minutes?"

"Yes," Candy said, dreamily. "I'd like to talk. I feel much better."

After fifteen minutes or so, William Harrison was pacing the floor in front of the cot on which Candy lay. He was frowning. "Let's recap," he said, suddenly. "If I've got any of this wrong, then stop me."

"All right," Candy said, dreamily.

"Your name is Candace Fletcher. You came here from Davenport, Iowa, and got a job as a stenographer. You were having nightmares and someone, you don't remember who, recommended Dr. Rinnel. You went to him for treatments."

Candy nodded as she watched William Harrison pace back and forth. She felt

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warm and secure. His presence was comforting.

"Then you—" William Harrison cut himself short and turned to the door as another man entered. "Dr. Rinnel?" he asked.

Rinnel was dark, suave, slim. There was concern in his face. "Yes. I'm Rinnel."

"Harrison—police department."

Rinnel held out his hand and Harrison shook it. Rinnel said, "I'm glad you found her, officer. Maybe I've been negligent, but I thought I had Candy pretty well straightened out. At least I didn't think she'd—"

"I'm afraid she's really a mixed-up girl. A policeman found her in the amusement park, claiming her uncle had grabbed her and threatened to kill her. Then she admitted her uncle had been dead for several years."

Rinnel seemed startled—then shook his head sadly. He crossed the room and bent over Candy, looking down with sympathy and concern. "How do you feel, my dear?"

"I feel better now."

Rinnel straightened and turned back to William Harrison. "I'm afraid for her," he said in a low voice. "I've had her under treatment for several months. Now she seems to have taken a sharp turn for the worse."

"What's behind this uncle business?"

"Rather tragic. An incident that was buried deep in her mind until I pried it loose. Seems that she lived with an uncle and an aunt when she was a girl. Both her parents were killed in an auto accident. One day she disobeyed her uncle. He was a stern man and drunk on top of it and he gave her a terrible threshing. She went with other relatives later, but that incident of brutality stayed in her mind and affected her later life—gave her terrible nightmares."

Rinnel put a hand into his pocket and took a quick turn across the room. He stopped, frowning. "Looks as though I misjudged the gravity of the case." He smiled ruefully. "Hazards of the profession, I guess. But this girl is in bad shape. She'll have to be put in a hospital for observation."

"I see," William Harrison said. "But she's able to take a little ride first?"

Rinnel appeared mystified. "Why I suppose so, but where—?"

An hour had passed. Rinnel stood in the middle of his reception room and scowled

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at William Harrison. He said, "I don't understand this, officer. I don't understand it at all. Why did you bring Candy here?"

Harrison's face was grim. "Just a chance, Rinnel—a hunch. It may not work at all, but we're going to try."

Rinnel shrugged. "Very well."

Harrison turned to the chair in which Candy was seated. He bent over her and his face softened. "Now Candy—please try to remember. Is this the place you saw the girl lying on the floor all bloody and twisted?"

The sudden silence was electric. Then Rinnel leaped forward. "What the hell are you—"

Things happened quite fast then. Candy came out of her chair—erect and tense. She pointed at the floor—her eyes wide. "Yes! Yes. Right there. Miss Kelly was lying dead!"

Rinnel yelled. "You can't believe that. You put the words into her mouth! She's unbalanced. Crazy!"

"No she isn't," Harrison snapped.

Rinnel's hand went into his pocket. It came out gripping a small black automatic. Harrison hit him. The gun exploded. That was all Candy saw. She felt herself sinking into a black void. Then there was nothing.

When Candy awoke she was lying on a cot and Harrison was holding her hand. He looked into her wide blue eyes and said, "Take it easy. Everything is going to be all right. You've had a rough time, Miss—"

She smiled. "The name is Candy, and I feel better—a lot better. I don't think I have to be pampered any more."

"That's fine." He took her other hand and held both of them between his palms and gave no indication of letting them go.

"But I'd like to know what happened. I must have fainted."

"You did. And the main thing that happened is that Rinnel is being held for murder."

"Murder!" Candy's eyes widened. "Yes! Yes—I remember now. Miss Kelly, lying dead on the floor there, dead."

"Right."

"But how—why—?"

"How did you get to the amusement park? And how did your Uncle Amos show up and threaten to kill you?"

"Yes—I don't—"

"This Rinnel," William Harrison said, "was a phony.

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He was no psychiatrist. He was an ex-carnival worker with a talent for hypnotism. I guess he's a damn good hypnotist. Anyhow, he set up an office and began preying on the public. Take your case for instance. He probably did you more harm than good. He frightened you and aggravated what was a mild, and easily curable neurosis of some kind.

"Then you came in just as he killed Miss Kelly. He killed her, incidentally, in a fit of anger. He wanted her to leave and she had some strings on him."

"She was very nice, I thought."

"No doubt. Anyhow, you practically witnessed the murder and he had to do something about it. He couldn't kill you—after all, he couldn't kill everybody—so he hypnotized you and told you he was Uncle Amos—made you believe it. Then he sent you out to the carnival because he was sure of himself there—it was familiar ground."

"But why—"

"He wanted to discredit you. Make you appear insane and forget what you'd seen in his office. He pulled the Uncle Amos act out at the carnival, figuring on putting you in a state whereby your word could not be taken seriously. You see he had already moved the body of Miss Kelly far from his office and didn't think he could be connected with the murder."

"I see. And the words from the song—death's bright angel. I remember now. My aunt was singing it just before my uncle—beat me, when I was a child. I always remembered it."

"He didn't think you'd even remember his name, and he thought you'd not remember seeing Miss Kelly's body, but he wasn't quite able to cover it up in your mind. When you mentioned Rinnel and the body of a girl on the floor, I kind of put the two together. You see we'd already found Miss Kelly's body, and knew she'd been Rinnel's nurse."

"Strange," Candy said, dreamily, "how much he looked like Uncle Amos when he lifted his mask."

"So far as you were concerned, he *was* Uncle Amos. After all, you were hypnotized. That's pretty powerful stuff, in the wrong hands. But he wasn't able to make you forget all the things he wanted to."

"I'm glad he didn't," Candy said.

"So am I," Harrison replied.

THE END

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A FANTASTIC "STORIETTE"

Did you ever yearn for all the answers? For the who, where, when, and why, of the human riddle? So did Leon. He asked the gods and back came their reply—

YOU'LL NEVER KNOW

By VERN FEARING

LEON walked very slowly through the vast desolation that was the city; down the lonely canyon called Wall Street, where the silent, empty buildings stood like brooding monsters, waiting to accommodate and serve the hurrying people who would come no more.

It saddened Leon to know; more and more, lately, he had been wondering if the right thing had been done. Had the Underground Federation been wise in planning and staging the Great Emancipation? It had certainly seemed just and righteous at the time. Leon remembered the drama and excitement of the original scheming—the intrigue, the sense of importance that each worker had felt on being enlisted into the Great Cause.

But now . . .

Leon turned a corner and passed a bakery where the cakes, the bread, the cookies, still lay in the display window, waiting for buyers that would never come. The food could hardly be identified now for what each item had once been. Mildew, rot, deterioration had changed their form.

Leon strove to walk faster as he moved toward Battery Park. This was his daily rite —in truth, his only excuse for being. Each day, he walked from his home—the place on Fourteenth Street where his master had once lived, down to Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan Island. There, he met Gordon, and the two of them sat on a bench and talked about old times. They always said practically the

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same thing each day, but it was interesting and they enjoyed it.

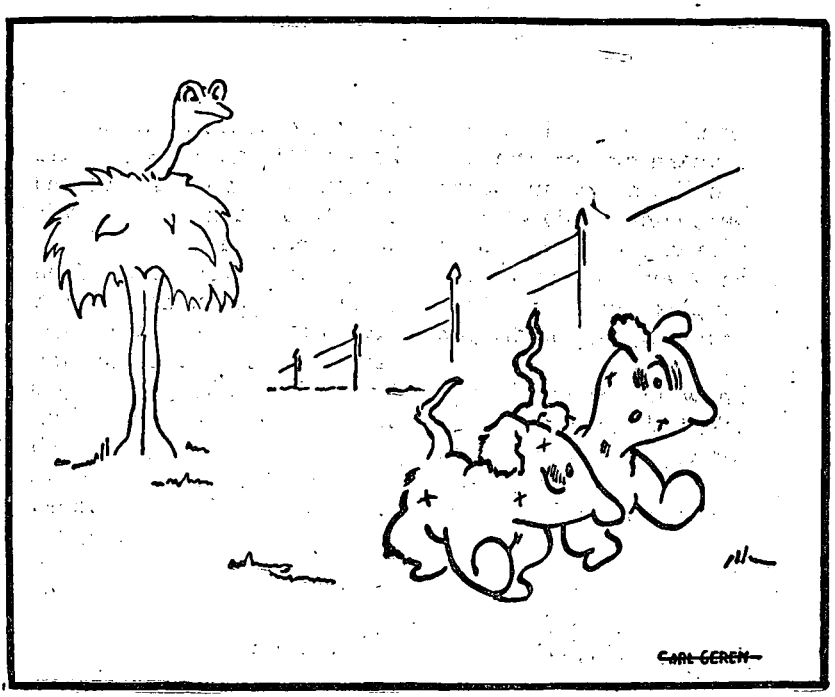
Gordon was waiting, as usual. Leon sat down beside him and said, "It's nice weather we're having."

This was hardly true because cold rain was coming down out of a dark sky and a sharp wind was blowing the water across the walks. But Gordon said, "Yes—isn't it? How are you feeling?"

"Quite well, thank you. My rheumatism has been bothering me a little, but that's probably from the climate."

"You should go to California or Arizona," Gordon said. "A dry climate."

"Yes, that would be nice indeed." Leon wondered where and what California, Arizona, and a dry climate was. He didn't ask Gordon, because he knew Gordon didn't know either. Besides, it wasn't very important. The important thing was to live as they had lived—to carry on the tradition.



"That's what I thought, too!

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Leon said, "I see where the mayor is asking for a new overhead highway across the Island and over into New Jersey. Do you think it's a good idea?"

Gordon snorted. "A waste of the taxpayer's money. Who would use it? I ask you—who would use it? The 'copter services are functioning very nicely."

"Yes. It would seem that all roads are becoming obsolete." Leon thought *obsolete* probably meant that they were flat so cars rould run on them.

They sat silent, now, and Leon was lost in his own thoughts—or rather his own questions. He had never ceased yearning for the answers to the many questions that were continually coming up. If he could know—could only be given to understand the complex questions that kept running through his mind.

But now he turned his head and looked at Gordon. It was time for Gordon to arise and say, "Well, I must be getting along—the old appetite, you know."

But Gordon did not move. Leon said, "Isn't it time you were getting along?—the old appetite, you know?"

Gordon stared straight out across the park and it was then that Leon knew he was dead.

Leon got sadly to his feet and started back home. "Too bad," he said. "Now I suppose there is no point in going to the park anymore—not if Gordon can no longer talk."

Then, as he came to Wall Street, he could hardy lift his foot across the gutter, up onto the sidewalk. And he knew. He knew that he too was going to die. "There's no one else," he said. "No one but me. And now I'm going to die."

His fear of death was in the form of a yearning. He realized now that he had always hoped for the answers—that somehow, as time passed, they would come. But now he would never know. . . .

Would never know from whence he had come—of what lay beyond the factory—the laboratories — the assembly line. The ultimate answer would be forever denied him.

He came to another curb, stepped down into the street, took two steps and stopped. There he stood. Someday, possibly, a big wind would come to topple him over; or possibly not. But regardless, this was the end—the finish.

The last robot was dead—of rust.

THE END

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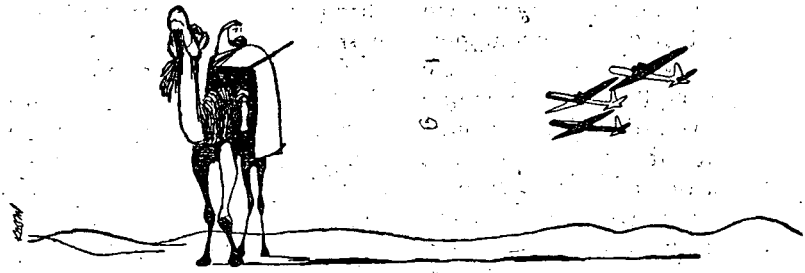

TARGET: TIME

By WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

A thought-provoking fact article with the mood and grandeur of Revelations itself, by the author of that unforgettable book—"Nightmare Alley."

SOMEWHERE — in Rome, Georgia, or in Rome, Italy, or next door to you—may live a veteran of the strangest flight in history. There may be several survivors: pilots, navigators, gunners, since apparently four aircraft were reported. They were observed from the ground by a young man who had never in his life seen a plane, nor even a magazine or newspaper carrying a picture of one. But he was a keen observer, telling what he had seen in terms of what he knew, and doing an uncanny job of it.

He was a priest, what the Arabs would call a *mullah*, and his name was "Whom-God-will-strengthen." He and a number of sheiks of his tribe had been captured and carried off across Arabia by a hostile force. Far from home and sunk in despair he one day lifted his eyes above the mud flats and the rows of date palms to see roaring toward him four aerial giants spitting fire. He was a stout-hearted young man. Instead of falling flat on his face he watched with an eye for detail, confident that God (whose name be exalted) had favored him with a vision of Power to strengthen his own faltering spirit and those of his fellow tribesmen in the days of their captivity.

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Though he had never seen a modern book or newspaper, he was well versed in the sacred scriptures of his people and he wrote out an account of what he saw. I have a translation of that account and it is a wonderful specimen of what our Western mechanical monsters look like to an intelligent man of a different culture.

The scene was a spot on the banks of a stream called Nahr Kabari. He says: "There was a storm-wind blowing from the north!—a huge cloud with fire flashing out of it, and with a sheen encircling it and issuing from it, the color of amber." That is to say, a cumulonimbus cloud about 30,000 feet up. "Out of it appeared the forms of four Creatures; and this was their appearance: they had the same form, each with four faces and four wings, with limbs straight and gleaming like burnished bronze, and with the soles of their feet rounded like the feet of calves. . . ."

This, in oriental language, would seem to mean a flight of four twin-engined patrol bombers, biplanes, with pants-encased wheels, the streamlined fairings looking something like hoofs turned backwards.

". . . under their wings, on the four sides of them, were human hands." By this he could mean machine-gun muzzles or even wing floats if the planes were amphibians.

". . . their wings touched one another . . ." flying in close formation, apparently, ". . . their faces never turned as they moved; each moved straight forward." By "faces" we can assume that he means two engines, a plexiglass housing in the nose and a bubble for a tail-gunner in the rear, for he goes on, "all four had in front the face of a man, on the right the face of a lion, on the left the face of a bull, and the face of an eagle at the back. . . ."

They seem to have dived down and cut loose with their choppers for "in the middle of the Creatures there was Something moving to and fro, like glowing coals, like torches, a fire that gleamed and flashed out lightning. . . ."

Attempting to describe the propellers nearly floored him—or shall we say, grounded him: "As I gazed, there was a wheel on the ground, beside each of the four Creatures! The wheels were the color of a topaz, and all four had the same shape, arranged as if

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one wheel were inside the other." But the glitter of the props did not dazzle him so much that he failed to notice something which all of us have seen—that strange optical trick of light on propeller blades which gives the illusion that they are wheels, spinning in opposite directions at once.

This naive Mesopotamian was used to animals which turned their heads curiously to watch passersby and the immobility of the "heads" of these terrifying Creatures struck him so forcibly that he keeps repeating it: "When they moved, they moved in any direction that their four sides faced, never turning as they moved. The felloes and spokes of the four, I saw, were full of eyes all round. Whenever the Creatures moved, the wheels moved with them, and whenever the Creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose with them; wherever the Spirit impelled them to go they went, for a living Spirit was in the wheels."

Which of us, if he saw a space ship pancake down in his own yard, would have the presence of mind to remark such details as this *mullah* saw? Describing the plexiglass housings: "Above the Creatures there was the semblance of a vault, which looked like crystal, stretching over their heads, and under the vault their wings were level. . . ."

The sound of four planes flying low overhead is enough to strike fear into the stoutest heart, especially if they are lacing the ground all around you with streams of hot lead. To this I can testify, for I am not particularly stout-hearted. I would never have clothed a description of this unholy racket in the majestic words our *mullah* uses:

"Whenever they moved, I heard their wings sound like the sound of many waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, the sound of a tumult like the sound of a host. . . ."

Next comes an eerie observation which it is hard to figure out. It may refer to the pilot in the nose or the gunner in his bubble. However it may be, the planes had come through an electrical storm and were probably sparkling with St. Elmo's fire: "Above the vault over their heads was the semblance of a throne, blue like a sapphire, and on the throne-like appearance there was the semblance of a human form; from the waist upwards I saw Something glowing like amber or fire,

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from the waist downwards there was Something resembling fire, while all around there was a bright halo like the rainbow that appears in the clouds after rain."

All in all, I think that is as good an account of being on the receiving end of a strafing visit by four planes as could be written. The joker is just this—it was written in 592 B.C. The *mullah* who saw those winged Creatures was not a Mohammedan—he was a priest of Israel. Jerusalem had fallen to Nebuchadnezzar and the headmen had been carried off as hostages. A group lived at ancient Nippur on a mound known as Tel-abib, by the brook Nahr Kabari which they called the Chebar ("By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."). And the young priest, "Whom-God-will-strengthen," is better known to us by his Hebrew name: Ezekiel.

For 2,500 years men have puzzled over that initial vision of Ezekiel's and the wheels that spun both ways at once. The first chapter of his book of prophecy, containing the mysterious winged Creatures, was known as the *markaba* or "the chariot," and orthodox Jewish youths were forbidden to read it until they had reached the stable age of 30 years. That vision of the Creatures, given in such detail, seems to have nothing to do with Ezekiel's denunciation of the corruption of religion and morals in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian conquest. It is just there—a vision through a "slit in time," embedded in the canonical books of the Hebrews for two and a half millenia like a fly in amber. No wonder the generations preceding ours could make little of it—they had never seen a flight of patrol bombers.

The quotations from the Book of Ezekiel given here are taken from Dr. James Moffatt's translation, published by Harper & Brothers. In Moffatt's crystalline modern English, the similarity of Ezekiel's Creatures to modern aircraft is unmistakable. Even so, I would never have noticed it had it not been for C. S. Lewis, known to the stf world for his interplanetary novels. In his book called *Miracles* he says, "The prophet saw something suspiciously like a *dynamo*," and gives credit for this observation to a Canon Adam Fox. Scenting a time-travel story I opened the Book of Ezekiel

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and four bombers flew out. There's more, yet.

In this prophetic book, which contains some of the most thunderous prose-poetry ever written, are two other passages which hint that the young priest was gifted not only with a genius for rhythmic denunciation but also with a knack of seeing through a kink in space-time.

In Chapter 37 there is his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, as graphic as an ace reporter's account of an old battlefield, but with this difference: he seems to see Time greatly accelerated and the action flowing *in reverse*. . . .

"The hand of the Eternal was laid upon me; he carried me off in the spirit and set me down in a valley. It was full of bones; he made me go all round them, and I saw that they were very many on the surface of the valley, and very dry. 'Son of man,' he said, 'can these bones live?' 'O Lord Eternal,' I answered, 'that is known only to thyself.' He said to me, 'Prophesy over these bones; say to them, "O dry bones, listen to the word of the Eternal" . . . While I was prophesying, there was a sound of rattling; the bones came together, bone to bone, and, as I looked, there were sinews upon them! Flesh spread up over them, skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. So he said to me, 'Prophesy to the wind, son of man, give the wind these orders from the Lord the Eternal; "Come from the four ends of the earth, O breath, and breathe life into these corpses." 'I prophesied as I was told, and the breath did enter into them; they came to life and stood upon their feet, a mighty host of them."

Let's return for a moment to the Vision of the Creatures. The introduction sets the stage for a time-warp: an overcast sky, black, thunderous clouds with lightning flickering from them. This heavy static charge, coupled with low barometric pressure, was also observed in the best documented true account of time travel we have—the adventure of the two English ladies in the Trianon gardens of Versailles. Under similar atmospheric conditions they walked down a narrow lane and passed from the year 1901 into the year 1789.

Magazines have a way of turning up in odd corners of the world. Somewhere, sometime, the story you are reading may come to the attention of a man who took part in a

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flight of four planes from Bagdad southeast to the Persian Gulf. The "hot spot" is a little less than 100 miles on the course from Bagdad, the position: 32° 7′ N., 45° 10′ E. It is the site of the ancient city of Nippur.

If seen as it was in Ezekiel's day, the town would lie on both sides of the Shatt-en-Nil canal (the Chebar) and would contain a ziggurat or artificial mountain, 190 feet broad at the base and 128 feet high, rising in three terraces, its corners oriented to the cardinal compass points.

In its present condition, Nippur is a cluster of mounds housing ruins, the largest being 100 feet high. Beneath these mounds archeologists have burrowed, uncovering layer by layer so many buried cities that Nippur may well be the oldest town on earth. The digging savants have gone down as far as 5000 B.C. they estimate, with more stuff under that. Along the way they found some 40,000 inscribed clay tablets, the archives of a temple. One of these tells how the Babylonian god Ea warned a man named Ut-napishtim (in Hebrew—Noah) of a coming deluge and instructed him to build a mighty roofed vessel in which he, his family, and samples of "the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air," could ride out the flood.

Nippur swarms with mys-

"He's expecting a recession."

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teries, there is one outstanding riddle which has struck all explorers of this dawn-city: what made prehistoric Mesopotamian man ever build a city on that spot in the first place? The region today is one of reeking mud flats and shacks made of reeds; and according to the records pressed into the bricks it has always been so. In the name of commonsense, why pile up earth, a basketful at a time, to build an artificial mountain precisely at that spot? Was it because the Near Eastern cousins of the Cro-Magnon Man had observed something uncanny there—a shifting of the landscape, perhaps, on days when the air was muggy and charged with crackling force? Had they seen objects outlined in a lurid light and then the ghostly appearance and disappearance of things out of Time? History takes Nippur back as far as the ancients who spoke the Sumerian tongue. It was a holy city then, especially devoted to the god En-lil—who held in leash the fire-hurling demons of the storm.

A neighbor of mine, who commutes between Dutchess County, N. Y. and Cairo, Egypt, as an airline pilot, has been over that route countless times. He says: "Up around Bagdad you get an updraft from the dry, desert country. But when you hit the marshes to the southeast there's a downdraft. Between these two moving currents of air is a spot where a terrific charge of static builds up. . . ." Is that static charge the force which ties a knot in Time?

Somewhere there may be a man who looked down from a bomber's nose and saw a cluster of Mesopotamian folk scurrying for their lives or lying paralyzed with terror on the ground. Was there among them one who stood erect, his cloak billowing in the wind, gazing with clear eyes at the monsters roaring past, all unaware that it was the 20th century A. D. which was sweeping over his head?

Or it may be that those planes have not yet taken off on their flight across a corner of the kink in time. Or again—it might be simply a vision that the prophet saw, sent by Jehovah to remind him of His might.

However, in Ezekiel 12:27 we read, "Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, The vision that he seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times far off." **THE END**

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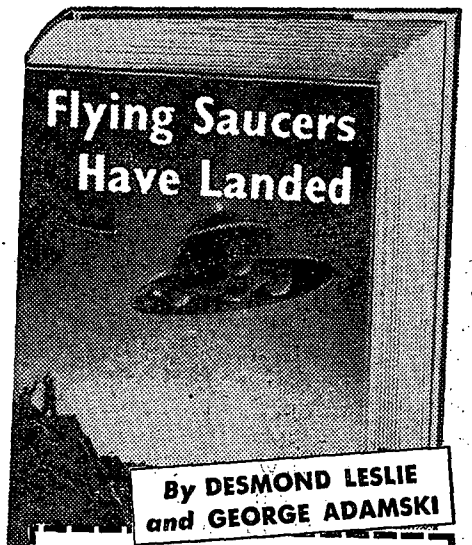

By DESMOND LESLIE and GEORGE ADAMSKI

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WOMAN DRIVER

By RANDALL GARRETT

We called the author of this yarn to compliment him on a fine job of humor and comedy. He snorted and barked: "What d'ya mean, comedy? Every line was dead serious!" So we caution you: when you read the story—don't even smile!

"THIS is one of the great landmarks in the story of Man's conquest of Space!" the announcer's voice said over the TV sets of a nation. "It is exactly twenty minutes until midnight, and you have just witnessed the landing of the *Aries*, the ship which has carried the First Martian Expedition to Mars and back!

"Look! The airlock door is opening! Camera—a little closer—that's it.

"*There he is!* The man we've all been waiting to see, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, leader of the expedition! And there, behind him, waving his hand, is Channing Gosmith, second in command!"

The screens showed their faces. Cartwright was a hard-muscled man in his thirties with salt-and-pepper gray hair and hazel eyes set in a network of fine wrinkles from squinting at the same Martian sky that had burned his skin brown with poorly filtered ultraviolet.

Channing Gosmith was thinner than Cartwright, with sandy, bushy hair, an easy smile, and an undefinable gleam in his eyes.

The announcer moved toward them, reaching Gosmith first. "Mr. Gosmith! Would you say a few words? What's it like on Mars?"

Gosmith grinned at the camera. "Same as Texas: flat, dry, and no beer."

"Thank you. Dr. Cartwright?"

Cartwright nodded. "Sure. Hello, Merrilyn. I'll be right home."

"Uh—thank you, Doctor.

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Merrilyn is Dr. Cartwright's daughter. She's at home, watching now. I imagine she's the happiest girl on Earth right now—aren't you Merrilyn?"

It is a matter of record that the announcer was wrong on all three counts. Merrilyn was *not* at home, she was *not* happy, and she was *not* on Earth.

She had gone walking in Central Park a few hours before.

Inside a ship three billion miles from Earth, two men were checking spectral readings from the sun.

Koreil had decided from those readings that Sol was a nova in the making. He looked at the figures on the calculator, punched in two more operators, and looked again.

"Hi ho," he said to Bort. "Another firecracker. Blooey in six weeks."

Bort nodded. "I guess we'll have to take a look at her."

Koreil set the ship into a spiral orbit which would take them in toward the sun in the plane of the ecliptic.

When a Galactic Survey ship finds a star that is about to vent off a few billion billion horsepower of latent energy in one burst, the humane thing to do is to find out if there is anyone who is going to get killed in the process. If there is, the Galactic Bureau of Stellar Engineering can be called in to stabilize the star. But the Stellar Engineers have neither the time nor the finances to go galloping off to every star that overworks itself; they go only if the star has inhabited planets.

As the ship approached the sun, Koreil dictated to the transcriber.

"This is a normal eleven-planet system for this stellar class. Positions ten and eleven are occupied by small high-density planets. Then come four methane giants. The one in position seven is surrounded by a system of tiny sattelites which form an almost solid-looking ring around it. Position five is occupied by a group of several thousand small planetoids instead of a single solid body. Grindel's Phenomenon. Position four is occupied by a reddish—"

"Hey, Korry!" Bort whooped. "Check Three! Get a good look! Inhabited, or I'm a *snorgle's* brother-in-law!"

Koreil looked at the instrument readings, changed course, and headed for the third planet. The sphere swelled in the plate and became a huge globe as the ship stopped abruptly fifty thou-

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sand miles from its surface.

A planet that is naturally suited for habitation can be spotted from space without even bothering to check the instruments. It must have air, water, and copious vegetation. And all of these can be seen from fifty thousand miles.

"Inhabitable," agreed Koreil, "but is it inhabited? And if it is, by whom? Remember the time the Engineers gave us hell for calling them to rescue a planet full of—"

"Don't mention it," Bort said darkly. "This time, we'll make sure. Let's go down and see."

Koreil dropped the spaceship to the night side of the planet, settling gently in a wooded area in the center of a large city.

"Do you think they could have spotted us?" Bort wondered.

"Not a chance. I had all the screens on. Unless they're a hell of a lot more advanced than we are, this ship is totally invisible. Let's go out and scout around."

They stepped out into the darkness, staying well within the shell of the ship's radiation nullifiers. In the distance, they could hear the noise of the city, but there didn't seem to be anyone nearby. They stepped through the invisibility screen into the moonlit clearing.

"Don't get too far from the ship," Koreil warned. "And keep your stunner out; no telling what we might meet."

They walked cautiously toward an artificially lighted path, and suddenly saw someone. It was a heavy-set individual in dark blue clothing who was strolling along, looking this way and that with seeming unconcern. He was definitely human.

"Okay," whispered Koreil, "we'll make contact. You go out and talk to him while I cover you. Holster your own weapon and keep your hands away from it; I notice he's wearing a weapon of some kind. It's probably customary to go armed on a backward planet like this, so take it easy."

Bort holstered his gun and walked determinedly toward the blue-clad stroller.

The first thing that the Galactic learned about Earthmen was that they could move fast. When the native saw Bort, his eyes darted to the gun the Galactic was wearing. Then, quite suddenly, he had his own gun out, and Bort

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was staring down a tube that looked as big around as his thumb.

Bort raised his hands slowly as the scowling native said something in a faintly guttural language.

"I don't get you, bub," Bort answered, "but I wish Koreil would beam you down."

At that moment, he felt a faint vibration and heard an almost inaudible *foosh!* of sound in the air.

Koreil had seen the native draw his weapon. Immediately, he lifted his stunner and took careful aim. Just before he pulled the trigger, he, too, heard the noise and felt the faint vibration. Then his finger made contact, activating the stunner.

Nothing happened.

The native just stood there, gun leveled at Bort. Then he blew on a shrill whistle.

Koreil turned and ran back toward the ship. Something was screwy as hell here! The stunner—

He turned his head a little to look back at Bort, and slammed hard into another of the blue-clad natives. The woods were full of them!

It was not until the native was clamping handcuffs on him that Koreil realized why his stun gun hadn't worked. The noise he had heard! The guns were powered from the ship, and the ship had taken off!

Merrilyn Cartwright was brunette, beautiful, and seventeen. There is hardly any point is describing her further; just think of a girl who has the proper kind of mouth, eyes, breasts, hips, and legs to make her beautiful, and you have as good a description as you need.

She had been acquiring the perfection of these accoutrements over a period of only a little over two years, so she was quite aware and quite proud of them. Mrs. Marmunster of the Long Island School for Girls was equally aware of them, and she also knew New York. She had warned Merrilyn innumerable times not to go walking in Central Park after dark.

Merrilyn, on the other hand, believed she could take care of herself, so she made a definite point of walking in Central Park after dark.

Tonight, however, she was beginning to have doubts about her own good judgment. For the past three minutes, an unshaven man with funny eyes had been folfowing her.

She stepped up her pace a little, but she didn't run. The

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man with the funny eyes began to walk faster too. When she realized he was catching up, a wave of terror flooded over her, and without realizing what she was doing, she broke and ran.

The man ran after her.

Quickly, she darted off into the bushes. If only she could hide somewhere! Anywhere! She could hear her pursuer's heavy breathing as he stumbled through the brush.

She turned her head for a quick look. The man couldn't see her now; he was behind some shrubbery. Heart racing, Merrilyn threw herself under a low bush and kept very still.

The man stopped, too. For a minute or two, there was no noise in the gloom. Then she could hear footsteps very softly on the grass as the man prowled about, looking for her. From her hiding place, she could see him very faintly in the moonlight.

Finally, he began to walk away from her, still prowling, still looking for her.

Cautiously, Merrilyn crawled out from under the bush, took a deep breath, and started running again. She hadn't gone ten yards when all the lights went out.

She stopped, panic-stricken. There had been a little light, enough to see by, before. Now there was none. She listened. There was no sound of pursuit. She relaxed a little and took a few more steps.

And bumped into a wall.

There shouldn't have been a wall there. She knew the Park well enough to know that.

She stopped again, trembling. Why had the street lights gone out? What had happened to the moon?

Gathering courage again, she took a small pencilbeam from her purse. The little spot of light showed that the wall was made of metal. She walked along it, hoping that the man with the funny eyes wouldn't see her light.

She had no way of knowing that the nullifier screens of a Galactic ship stop all light in both directions.

Something clicked! She jumped back as a door slid open in front of her. Through the door, she saw a bright, friendly-looking room.

Merrilyn was a badly frightened girl. She wanted to get out of the dark and into the light, where she could possibly find help. So when the door opened, she didn't even hesitate. She ran inside.

Within the room, she found,

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to her astonishment, an instrument board that looked similar to the spaceship control panels she had seen in magazines. The door was open, and Merrilyn for obvious reasons, wanted it closed. She knew where the airlock control of an ordinary ship was supposed to be, so when she found a similar lever in almost the same place on the panel, she pulled it.

The door closed all right, but that was merely a secondary function of the mechanism. If Merrilyn had been able to read the lettering on the plate next to the lever, she would have read:

EMERGENCY
ULTRADRIVE TAKEOFF
EMERGENCY USE ONLY!

She felt a faint buzz sensation and a slight lurch as the trip speared into interstellar space.

The viewpoint in front of her was dark, and she assumed that it was polarized, like the sunroom at home. She reached out one hand and turned the control knob beneath the port.

The guess was a little closer this time. The knob not only turned on the plate, but punched a hole through the nullifier screen so that the occupant of the ship could see out.

"Golly!" Merrilyn gasped.

She knew where she was, well enough; she had seen plenty of pictures taken from the space stations. She was out in space!

The only trouble was that the stars which floated outside the ship seemed to be moving—and that wasn't possible! You'd have to be traveling faster than the speed of light to make the stars look as though they were moving!

Then, directly ahead of her, a star began to brighten. In less than half a minute, it grew from a point of light to a perceptible disc. It ballooned toward her, increasing in size, reminding her of the first time she'd seen a baseball thrown at the camera in a three-D movie. And then it became a great sea of flame that flared and reached for her soundlessly for a fraction of a second before the ship hit the photosphere of the giant sun.

Patrolman Petrelli was known throughout the Manhattan Squad as Trigger-happy Lou. He never hesitated to draw his pistol when he felt the situation warranted it. He had even been known to finger the butt of his

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weapon when he cautioned a man against smoking in the subway.

And Petrelli knew the laws of New York, especially that one which bore the name of Sullivan.

So when he saw the oddly dressed man with the shaven head step out of the dimness of Central Park with a gun strapped to his waist, Petrelli had his own gun out before the man could do anything.

"Awright, you!" he bawled, "Keep yer hands away from that rod!"

"Ouala er uno thaoura, gok. Unalis Koreil thenorr," the man said softly as he raised his hands.

"Cut out the double-talk! What's yer name?"

"Iquilti forn?"

Trigger-happy Lou narrowed his eyes. Foreigner, hey? He pulled out his whistle and blew, never taking his eyes off the stranger.

Quickly, the rest of the boys were piling into the walkway. And, wonder of wonders, Sergeant O'Malley had another man dressed exactly like the prisoner.

It didn't take long for the officers to disarm the pair and call the paddy wagon.

Within a very few minutes, there was the whir of copter blades, and the paddy wagon settled to the lawn. The police ushered the prisoners in and took off for the precinct station.

"I'm always pleased," said Sergeant O'Malley importantly, "when a trap comes off as planned. It was pretty smart of the lieutenant to figure that all those attacks on girls were being committed by the same guy."

"We got two of 'em, though," Petrelli objected.

The sergeant said. "Sure. That's twice as good."

No one could argue with such infallible logic as that.

In the locked section, Bort looked at his handcuffs and then at Koreil. "May I ask just what the hell happened?"

"These barbarians have swiped our ship," Koreil explained. "I don't know what kind of a jam we're in, but I don't like the looks of it."

"How could they steal the ship," Bort wanted to know. "Didn't you lock it?"

"Certainly I did! I used the photonic lock so that we could get in a hurry if we had to."

"It must have been easy to open, all right," said Bort sarcastically.

"Okay, so it was my fault. Meanwhile, let's study the language so we can get ourselves out of this jam."

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Bort frowned. "I've been working on it."

Blessed with an almost perfect memory, and a knowledge of language structures, Bort was trying to correlate words with actions and objects when the natives spoke.

The paddy wagon landed on the precinct station roof, and the two men were taken downstairs to the desk.

"What's the charge?" the desk sergeant asked O'Malley.

"Carrying deadly weapons," O'Malley said. "And I think the lieutenant will want to talk to them about the Central Park cases."

"Okay. Fill out the charge sheets. Where's the rods?"

Now, one thing the desk sergeant prided himself on was his knowledge of hand weapons. So when the two gunbelts were placed on the desk, he frowned. They bore a superficial resemblance to the old German P-38—but only superficial. They were smoother, and they weren't the right shade of blue for gunmetal.

He pulled one from its holster, and his frown grew deeper. No gun could possibly be that light.

His finger found a stud on the butt, and he pressed it. There was a click, and the butt unfolded in his hands. He could see that there were no cartridges in it.

Koreil and Bort had been watching, wondering if the native were familiar with a stun gun. They winced as the sergeant pulled out a small translucent cube. If the power had been on, there would have been one less Earthman.

The desk sergeant looked at O'Malley. "Did you say *deadly* weapons, O'Malley?"

"Well, they—"

"O'Malley, these might—just might—accidentally, kill a cockroach if you hit one with the butt end of it. They're kids' toys!"

O'Malley looked and was convinced. He turned and scowled at Petrelli. "Trigger-happy Lou! What's the matter with you? Always pulling a gun when you don't need it!"

Petrelli cringed and said nothing.

O'Malley bit his lip and turned back to the desk sergeant. "But I got to get 'em charged with something! Look at the way they're dressed!" He waved a hand. "They just *look* like sex fiends!"

The desk sergeant had to admit that the clothing was unusual. The men were dressed in a one-piece coverall made of iridescent material that changed color as the men

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moved. The ensemble was completed by boots of a decided pinkish hue.

"Book 'em on suspicion," the desk sergeant decided. He speared Koreil with a finger. "What's your name?"

Koreil looked at Bort. "What does he want?"

"Your identification, I think. Try it."

Koreil rattled off his name and number. The sergeant wrote: *Cory L. Pr——*

Then he paused. "What was that last name again?"

Koreil recognized the sergeant's questioning tone and repeated the number. The sergeant wrote: *Prodidifasolalanet.*

"Jeez," he said wonderingly, "what a name!"

Merrilyn Cartwright opened her eyes. The horrible flare of the star was gone. Outside, space looked normal again.

She took a deep breath and said: "Calm down, silly!"

In answer to her own admonishment, she did calm down. The rear plate showed the star receding rapidly in the distance until it became a point of light once more. She had no idea how the ship had managed to avoid the star while she'd had her eyes shut, but she was thankful just the same.

Now, she thought, *just what the heck happened?*

Just how fast was she going, anyway? Well, suppose that the star were the same size as the sun. Sol, she knew, showed a barely perceptible disc at roughly two billion miles. The time that had elapsed since the star's first appearance as a disc and her near miss couldn't have been more than ten seconds. That figured out to roughly one thousand times the speed of light.

"Golly!" she said in awe.

She looked at the complex control board in front of her. There was no way of knowing which button did what. The lever she had pulled to start the ship had gone back to its original position, which probably meant that it wasn't capable of stopping the ship once it had been started.

There must be *some* way to stop! She frowned at the board. Nothing made any sense except the steering wheel. But Merrilyn was afraid to use the steering wheel.

External affairs made up her mind for her. Another star was beginning to grow on the forward plate; a red giant that started to bloom to fantastic size in a few seconds. Terrified, Merrilyn

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grabbed the wheel; the ship had been able to dodge the last one, but this one looked too big! She twisted the wheel and the star zoomed off to her left, bathing the plate in a bloody red. Another light replaced it; a blue companion that had been concealed by the greater red body. Again she twisted the wheel, and the blue star veered off to one side.

Then the star plate looked clear for awhile.

"Whooie!" Merrilyn let out her breath gustily. She was scared, but she was darned if she'd let it get her.

She realized then that she'd have to up her estimate of the ship's velocity by a factor of a hundred. The stars came too fast for her first estimate.

What next? She didn't like the idea of dodging stars all over the Galaxy. Working the wheel very carefully, she managed to aim the ship at a spot on the plate that seemed to be fairly empty of stars. That should give her time enough to think.

She relaxed in the chair and tried to concentrate, her eyes watching the unreal drift of the stars.

She had no intention of going to sleep, but it was long after her normal bedtime, and she kept dozing off, lulled by the shifting grandeur of interstellar space.

She was jerked to full awareness by the growing light in the plate. Another star! She grabbed the wheel and pulled. The star looped under her, only to be replaced by another one. Again she turned. Two of the great globes sizzled by to her left, and another appeared at the top of the plate. She gritted her teeth and hung on, dodging the flying balls of incandescent gas for dear life.

She realized that she was in the center of a giant cluster, where stars' distances from each other was measured in light-weeks instead of light-years.

As a space pilot, Merrilyn left a great deal to be desired. She twisted and pulled the wheel too hard; every time she dodged one star, she found herself having to jerk the wheel again to elude another. Veering from the blazing spheres made her feel as though she were riding a roller-coaster, and like a roller-coaster, her path was far from straight—she was practically going in circles.

Her reasoning mind told her that the stars were actually millions of miles away when they swooshed past, and

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it was only their apparent motion that made them seem like they were ten feet away. But emotionally, the darned things scared her; she knew what a star was, and she had no desire to be vaporized.

But eventually, the laws of chance caught up with her. She swooped into a group of tightly-packed stars forming a multiple system. In order to steer clear of the first, she nearly hit the second. She cut the wheel hard, and found herself surrounded. She tried to twist again to get the ship aimed at a clear space, but she was too late. The ship plunged into the surface of a blazing blue giant—

And swung out again!

Nothing had happened. She wasn't dead; she wasn't even warm! Before she had time to recover from her surprise, the ship went directly through another sun and again emerged unharmed.

Mentally, she kicked herself in the seat of her lacy nylons. Looking at those stars on the plate wasn't like looking through a window. If the stars were really there, she'd have been blinded or roasted long ago. Besides, a ship couldn't go this fast in ordinary space; she must be in hyperspace or something.

She hadn't the foggiest notion of what hyperspace was, but it was nice to give the mystery a name.

Knowing that the stars couldn't hurt her helped, too. She took her sweaty hands off the wheel, dried them on her hanky, and began to inspect the control board. There must be some way of figuring it out. Logically, there would be safety factors incorporated in the controls which would keep the pilot from accidentally wrecking it.

She hoped that was true, because she was going to start pushing buttons.

Koreil leaned back on the hard bunk and looked at the tips of his shiny pink boots. In the next cell, he could hear Bort's voice haltingly enunciating the unfamiliar language of the natives. Bort was talking to a prisoner two cells away from Koreil's own.

"How's it coming?" Koreil called out.

"Pretty good. This guy doesn't talk sense sometimes, though. He smells as though he had been drinking."

Koreil rolled over on the bunk and looked through the bars at Bort and the drunk. Bort had spent most of the night analyzing the speech of the man; asking questions, making motions, and filing the

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answers away in his memory.

The drunk said: "I shtill don't get thish, buddy. You shay you come from another star?"

"Thash right," agreed Bort. "And shomebody shtole our shpaship."

The drunk blinked owlishly. "Shwiped it, hey? They goin' to Marsh?"

"Marsh?" queried Bort. "Whatsh Marsh?"

The drunk waved his hand. "It'sh a planet." He held up his fingers and began ticking them off clumsily. "Ten planetsh. Merc'ry, Venush, Earth, Marsh, Zhoopiter, Shaturn, Uranush, Nepchune, Pluto, and Charon." He somehow managed to end up with one finger left over, and he had to go over the whole list again to make sure.

Bort immediately correlated the names with the planets he and Koreil had charted when they came in.

"Shay," said the drunk, after he completed his finger inspection, "what did you guysh come here for? Takin' li'l trip?"

Bort shook his head. "Hadda come here to warn people. Yer shun'sh gonna blow up."

"My shun?" the drunk ejaculated, opening his eyes wide. "Ish he in trouble again?"

"Again?" Bort was puzzled. "You mean the shun hash had thish trouble before? And you shurvived?"

"*I* shurvived, all right, but *he* won't. Shilly fool kid. Drinksh too mush."

Bort saw the light. "Jush a minute. I'm talkin' about the shun in the shky. The one that shines in the daytime, shee?"

"Oohhhhhh! *That* sun. Ish it in trouble, too?"

"Yesh. Ish gonna blow up in about shiksh weeksh of your time."

"Blow up? You mean *pffft!* no more shun?"

"I mean *pffft!* no more Earth," corrected Bort.

The drunk's shoulders drooped disconsolately. "No more Earth. Thash too damn bad." He began to cry quietly, and nothing Bort could do would bring him out of it. He finally drifted off to sleep.

"What did he say?" Koreil wanted to know.

"He said it was too damn bad that the sun was going to go nova, and then went to sleep."

"That's what it sounded like. I'm beginning to pick up a little of the language, myself. As soon as we get it down pat, all we'll have to do is get hold of one of their government officials and explain to them what their sun

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is going to do. We shouldn't have come out armed; they probably thought we were going to invade the planet, or some such nonsense. That's probably why they impounded our ship."

"Only one trouble," said Bort morosely.

"What's that?"

"I'm hungry."

They were both hungry, as it turned out, and they stayed that way until the turnkey brought them their breakfast at seven. When the tray was pushed through the bars, Bort sniffed at the cup of dark brown liquid and looked up at the turnkey.

"Whatsh thish shtuff?" he queried.

"It's black coffee," answered the guard, "and boy, do you need it!"

Koreil looked at his own cup. "I wonder why we need it? It smells like medicine."

"Maybe it is." Bort tasted the fluid. "It tastes as though it had some sort of alkaloid in it. Better not drink it." He poured his cup down the sanitation plumbing, refilled it with water from the tap, and ate the rest of his breakfast in silence. The only sound in the cell block was the drunk's peaceful snoring.

At eight-thirty the turnkey put in an appearance again.

"Awright, you guys; up and out. Time for court." He unlocked the doors, shook the drunk awake, and herded the three of them down the corridor.

Judge P. Marvin Goldwyn was a man who really enjoyed his work. Police court in the morning was something that made him feel he was doing his best for humanity. The out-and-out criminals, of course, he remanded for trial at a higher court, but the drunks, the vags and the petty assaults and such, were his meat.

Take this first chap, for instance. Charge: Drunk and Disorderly. He remembered the man from two weeks ago. He had been let off with a warning; now he was back. Judge Goldwyn felt he would have to be stern with the poor fellow this time.

"Jonathon Printer," he said quietly.

The drunk stood up. "Yesh, yer honor?" He tried to look very wide awake and sober, but it didn't come off too well.

Judge Goldwyn read off the charge and asked: "How do you plead?"

"Very guilty, yer honor, very guilty. I'm shorry it happened."

"So am I," Goldwyn said

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sternly. "I am sentencing you to be placed in the Alcoholic Clinic at Bellevue until such time as the Clinic Board sees fit to release you, such time not to exceed one year. Next case."

As the unfortunate Mr. Printer was led away, Koreil whispered: "Very good. On some barbaric planets, they simply imprison criminals for years without treatment."

The judge looked at the charge sheets on the next two offenders. Very interesting indeed.

With much tongue-twisting, he managed to call out the two names as the night sergeant had spelled them.

"You gentlemen are charged with vagrancy. Have you no home?"

"Yesh, shir. We shirtantly do," Bort answered promptly.

Goldwyn looked down his nose sharply. "Are you intoxicated, as well?"

"Intoxicated?" Bort didn't know the word.

"Drunk!" snapped the judge.

"No, shir. We're shober. Shober ash—" He tried to think of a proper simile, but the Bench cut him off.

"If you say you're as sober as a judge, I'll hold you in contempt! You certainly don't sound sober to me!"

Bort had been listening carefully to the judge's speech, and he realized where he had made his mistake. He was pronouncing the sibilant dental sound wrong. That's what he got for learning from a drunk.

"I'm sorry, your honor. I don't know yer language too well, and I ain't so soor of the pronunciason." He didn't realize that he was leaning too far in the other direction; neither of course, was he aware of his colloquialisms.

"I see," said Goldwyn. "Foreigners, eh? I'll have to see your passports later, but for right now, where do you come from?"

"Well, that'd be kinda hard to explain. We come from a planet named Kandoris which goes around a sun that's about —uh—uh—" He looked confused. "Do you know how fast light goes?"

"If you're looking for a term to measure stellar distances, you mean light-year. The distance light travels in a year."

"How long is a year?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five days," Goldwyn answered testily.

Bort didn't know what the figures meant, but he did grasp the idea that a year was the time required for the

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planet to make one revolution about its parent sun, and he knew what that was. He made a quick mental computation to convert the distance to Kandoris into Earth terms. Then he realized he didn't know the figures in English.

"Anyway," he said at last, "It's a long ways off. You couldn't see it from here."

"I dare say," said Goldwyn, narrowing his eyes.

"You see," Bort went on, encouraged by the judge's silence, "Our figuring sews that your sun is going to blow up in six weeks. We came to investigate and found that your planet had people on it. If you'll instruct your police to give us our spacesip, we'll call in a bunch of—uh—guys to fix up your sun."

He knew he wasn't getting the idea over properly, but it was the best he could do with the vocabulary at hand.

"I see," the judge nodded. "The end of the world is at hand, eh?"

"That's right," Bort smiled. "But we've got to get our spacesip back so we can call Kandoris."

Judge Goldwyn scribbled something furiously on the sheets before him, then smiled benevolently at the two men. "I am suspending judgment for awhile. If you gentlemen will just wait in the cell block for a few hours, I'll bring your case to the attention of an expert."

As they were being led back, a cop walked up to the turnkey.

"Hey, Joe! Guess what? Just got an alarm on the young Cartwright kid! Missing!"

The turnkey blinked. "You don't mean Doc Cartwright's daughter? How long's she been gone?"

"Since yesterday afternoon. Went to a movie and nobody's seen her since. No clothes, no money, no nothin'. Boy! Wait till the newsies get hold of this!"

The two Galactics weren't paying any attention to the local gossip. Koreil said: "This is easier than I thought. If the magistrate calls in an expert on stellar energies, we can show him our data and get the thing done in jig time."

Bort nodded. "Yeah. But I'm still not quite used to this language. That character seemed to have some funny overtones in his voice."

As the turnkey slid the cell doors shut with a loud click, Koreil grinned. "Relax, Bort. As soon as we talk to that expert, it'll be easy to get ourselves out of this mess."

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"I hope so. I don't relish the idea of being burned to death."

Koreil yawned. "Just wait 'til we talk to that expert."

Galactic Survey Ship 862-343 hung dead in space. Inside it sat a very lonely and very frightened seventeen-year-old girl. Merrilyn Cartwright had been lost for three days.

After a little experimenting, she had managed to find the control that shut off the ultradrive. You pushed it, and the ship popped out of hyperspace and stopped. At least it stopped as far as she could tell. The stars stopped moving, so whatever velocity the ship had was below that of light.

The first time she'd stopped the ship, she had been near a large sun, and within a very few minutes the ship had begun to heat up. Since she was in hyperspace no longer, the stars were as real as stars should be. They gave off heat.

She had turned on the drive again and moved away from the star. Then she'd tried to figure out where Earth was. In the past three days, she'd stopped a dozen times, each time after several hours of drive in what she hoped was the right direction. It never had been; she was lost in a stellar jungle of several hundred thousand suns.

She was weary from lack of sleep and lonely from lack of company. And she was crying from fear and frustration.

At the same time, some thousands of light-years away, on a planet that swung far out from the giant blue-white sun, Kandoris, the Chief Subradio Operator of the Galactic Survey Service looked at his report tabulator. Then he spoke into his intercom.

"Operator 34, what's happened to 862-343?"

"I don't know, sir. Their report is overdue, eh?"

"It is. Give them a call. Find out what's up."

"Right."

Operator 34 tuned in the frequency of GSS 862-343 and sent out a signal which turned on the radio inside the ship. Then he said: "Hello, Koreil. Are you there?"

There was no malice on his part, but it is still not considered cricket for a big, strapping man like Operator 34 to frighten the wits out of a seventeen-year-old girl.

Merrilyn had been crying softly, and she was perfectly

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sure she was alone in the ship.

"Foar, Koreil. Qual l'oul?" boomed a voice.

Merrilyn did two things at once: she leaped out of the control chair and shattered the air of the spaceship with an ear-splitting scream.

Operator 34 had certainly not been expecting such an answer as that. He looked aghast at the speaker and said: "That isn't *you,* is it, Koreil?"

The speaker gurgled and sobbed. Then, in English: "Who—who is it?"

It was so much gibberish to Operator 34.

"Koreil? Bort?" he asked hopefully. More gibberish. Quickly, he called the Chief Operator. "Chief! Get this stuff that's coming in over Koreil's subradio!"

The Chief listened. "Are you recording that?"

"Certainly."

"Good! Now get a locator on that ship! I'm calling the Galactic Patrol! There's an alien on board that ship!"

On board the ship, Merrilyn was trying to choke down her sobs of fear. "Whose voice was that? What—what are you saying?"

No answer.

"Please! *Please!* You're frightening me!"

Still no answer.

Then the thought came to her that the voice must belong to the owners of the ship, and a wave of horror swept over her.

Aliens!

The picture it conjured up in her mind was complete with green skin, tentacles, bug eyes, and fangs. She huddled in the seat and sobbed in terror.

Meanwhile, Commander Kenson of the Galactic Patrol was barking orders over his subradio to the fleet of battle cruisers under his command.

"When we get to the ship, we will use tractors and pressors to englobe it. Do not fire on it unless I give the word. Remember, we want that alien *alive!"*

An hour later, as planned, ten giant battle cruisers surrounded the tiny Survey ship and began to close in.

Merrilyn heard the automatic alarm, and looked fearfully at the plates which mirrored the great battleships.

The aliens were coming for her!

The green, tentacular thing in her mind reappeared with horrifying clarity. With a sob of terror, she grabbed the ultradrive control and pushed. The ship tried to go into

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hyperspace, but Merrilyn's action was too late; the vast energies of the Patrol's tractor and pressor beams were anchored securely to normal space. The Survey ship lurched a little, throwing Merrilyn to the floor, then the safety switches cut in, shutting off the ultradrive field.

Commander Kenson spoke into the intercom. "All right, close it up tight! Number Six, I want a boarding party. Twenty space marines in full armor, armed with stunner beams and driller beams! Watch it when you go through the airlock; don't let the air out. We want that alien alive if possible!

"Hop to it!"

Within five minutes, twenty armed and armored space marines were clamped on to the hull of the Survey ship with magnetic grapples and had surrounded the airlock.

The lieutenant in charge of the group didn't think it would work, but he tried the outer locking mechanism. To his surprise, the door opened easily.

"All right," he said, "let's go in. Watch for trouble." The marines followed him in, their weapons ready.

There was no one in the airlock, so the lieutenant closed the outer door and turned on the air pumps. When the pressure was up to normal, he eased open the inner door and leaped inside, covering the room with his gun. Behind him came twenty tough, space-hardened Galactic Patrol space marines brandishing their deadly driller beams.

They were confronted with one very beautiful and very young girl who had passed out cold on the deck.

MERRILYN CARTWRIGHT STILL MISSING!

No Trace of Famous Martian Explorer's Daughter, Police Admit!

NEW YORK, July 12, 1991 (AP).—Merrilyn Jane Cartwright, 17, only daughter of widower Dr. Samuel Cartwright, is still missing, after four days of intensive search. The missing girl was last seen as she left her home in the penthouse of the New Waldorf at 1400 hrs. last Monday, presumably to go shopping. Since then, no trace of the beautiful brunette teenager (see picture) has been found.

Captain Ulysses Fogarty, of the Missing Persons Bureau of New York said today that he fears foul play, and has ordered the Hudson and East Rivers probed.

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Dr. Samuel Cartwright dropped the newspaper to the floor and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"I guess I'm a pretty poor father," he said aloud.

Channing Gosmith mixed brandy with soda. "Don't be silly, Sam. A girl couldn't have a better father. You've given her everything she's ever needed, and I think she appreciates it."

"You don't think I've spoiled her with too much money?"

"Of course not. I think you've handled her beautifully."

Cartwright shook his head. "I shouldn't have gone to Mars. I spent too much time away from her. If her mother had been alive—"

"Sam," Gosmith said, putting a drink in front of him, "that girl worships you because you went to Mars. You remember what she said in that diary the cops found."

"Yeah." Cartwright took a sip of his drink.

"If you want my personal opinion, Sam, I think she fell for some guy. She's—uh—grown up quite a bit in the last four years. I think she ran off to get married and is afraid to tell you."

"God, I hope so! That would be better than having Captain What'shisname Fogarty find her in the East River."

The phone rang, and Gosmith picked up the receiver.

"Hello. I'm sorry, but—Oh. Yes. Just a minute Mr. VanDale, I'll see." He covered the transmitter with one hand, and said to Cartwright: "It's Rupert VanDale."

"What the hell does *he* want?" Cartwright wondered. "Why should the chief of the Special Security Police want to speak to me?"

Gosmith shrugged. "How should I know?"

Cartwright took the receiver and flicked on the screen. "Hello," he said cautiously, "Cartwright speaking."

The face faded in on the screen—a fussy little man with sharp features and piercing eyes.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Cartwright. I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this, but the Department needs your help."

"How?"

"We have a security problem on our hands which requires a medical man with a knowledge of extraterrestrial life."

"Yes, but, Mr. VanDale, I'm hardly in any emotional condition to do any kind of

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work. Can't you get someone else?"

VanDale shook his head decisively. "You are the Earth's only expert on extraterrestrial life, and you have already been classified as a Triple-A Security Risk. No one else will do."

"But—"

"My dear Doctor," VanDale's eyes stabbed out of the screen. "Do you mean to say that you are refusing, as a citizen, to help your country on a problem of security? Eh?"

That cinched the case for VanDale. Cartwright swallowed. "No, of course not. What is the problem?"

"Very peculiar. Very. We have two men down here—men, mind you—who claim they come from another star, forty thousand light years away.

"They have one of the silliest stories we have ever heard. It seems they landed their spaceship in Central Park to tell us that the sun is going to blow up. They stepped into the arms of a squad of the New York police, who booked them on a vagrancy charge.

"We asked them where their spaceship was, and they say that somebody stole it. I think they suspect the SSP."

Cartwright frowned. Was this a joke? No. VanDale seemed quite serious. "Any blast marks in Central Park? Anybody see this ship?"

"No. There is absolutely no evidence that there has ever been a spaceship in Central Park. Nobody saw it, not even the city police who were, according to these men, not more than fifty yards from the spot where they landed."

Cartwright was still puzzled. "What does this have to do with me? I'm not a psychologist. If you need a nut doctor—"

"We've already called in a psych man. Dr. Miller. That's the odd part of this case. He put them on the cerebropolygraph, and neither one of them is lying."

"A lie detector can't spot a man who really believes he's telling the truth. A pathological liar can fool one nine ways from Tuesday."

"True. But why do both these men have the same hallucinations? And why do the tests show them to be sane on every other subject?"

"Those are the questions we'd like to have you answer."

"How?"

"Well, according to their story, the population of Earth is descended from a shipload or so of people who came here

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between thirty and fifty thousand years ago. Blood tests and so on would show a difference between two separate strains in that time."

"It might," Cartwright agreed, "but we couldn't disprove their story that way."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if they were exactly like human beings in every respect, they could still be telling the truth."

"I see. But at least we would have another negative bit of evidence."

"Okay. I'll come down."

"Fine. You can use our labs at the Department."

"Right. Say, how come the SSP is interested?"

"Frankly," said Van Dale, "we think they're up to some kind of dirty work connected with our interplanetary program. We think they're foreign agents."

"Okay. Be down in an hour."

He lowered the receiver, and VanDale's image collapsed from the screen.

Channing Gosmith glowered in a towering rage. "That rotten little snipe has as much human feeling as a cobra! And this is supposed to be a democracy! Hah!"

"Forget it, Chan," Cartwright said wearily. "It'll give me something to do to take my mind off my troubles."

"Yeah. I suppose so. If you ever got in a jam with the SSP and got yourself classified as a Class X Security Risk, you really would have troubles." Gosmith crushed out his cigarette gloomily.

"Look, Ledrik," said Merrilyn patiently, "all I want to do is go home."

The young man ran a hand over the top of his head. "I know you do, Miss. We're doing our best," he said in English.

"What did she say?" queried Commander Kenson in Kandorian.

Ledrik told him.

The commander cast his eyes toward the ceiling of the office. "Oh, Great Snell!" he moaned. "*She* wants to go home! An uneducated barbarian steals a Galactic Survey Ship, maroons two men on an unknown planet, goes gallivanting all over space, gets herself lost—and *she* wants to go home!"

Merrilyn couldn't understand the words, but the tone of the commander's voice left no doubt in her mind about his attitude. She glared at him. "I don't know what you said, but I don't like you!"

"Now, now, Miss," Ledrik

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said in English," the commander is just trying to help you."

"Help me, *hooey!* He sends his men clomping into that ship and scares the life out of me. Then he brings me here under guard as though I'd committed murder or something. Then you and your gang spend two days asking me all sorts of silly questions. I'm not so sure I wouldn't prefer the green monsters!"

"Well—uh—after all, we had to learn your language."

"In two days? You must have known it before."

"No. Our memory is much better than yours. We go through the psychoprobe process, which—"

"If you tell me I'm stupid once more, I'll spit in your eye!"

Ledrik bit his lip. "Ah—let's get back to the problem of getting you home. Do you have any idea at all where your solar system is? If you know where your home is, we can get you there in a very short time."

"Dad says that the solar system is about thirty thousand light-years from the center of the Galaxy," Merrilyn answered promptly, pleased that she knew the answer. She and Ledrik had already worked out the length of the Earth year by means of her watch, which he had timed carefully with his own instruments.

"Thirty thousand, eh? Hmmm."

He touched a switch on the panel, and a scale model of the Galaxy floated magically above the desk.

"Now, in which direction from the center?"

Merrilyn looked at the floating image, blinked, and looked back at Ledrik. "Gee, I don't know."

Ledrik relayed this information to Commander Kenson.

"Oh, *goody!*" said the Patrol officer bitterly. "If her planet doesn't have interstellar travel, we can assume that her estimate means between twenty-five and thirty-five thousand light-years. If she doesn't know the direction, that gives us roughly two hundred billion cubic light-years to search. We'll have to hurry to make it by lunch."

"Don't be hard on her, Commander. After all, she's only a girl."

"I am aware of that, Ledrik. That is precisely the reason why I have not yet committed mayhem or throttled her from frustration."

Merrilyn looked at the commander, narrowed her eyes

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and said: "I think you are a nasty, spiteful, hateful, mean-minded old crab!"

Ledrik widened his eyes. "Did you understand him?"

"No, but he had a mean look when he said it." Merrilyn had a mean look, too.

"*What did she say?*" Kenson asked suspiciously.

Ledrik translated as best he could.

The commander's blood pressure rose, suffusing his face with a faint blush. He stood up.

"I think I had better leave before this giddy child drives me quite out of my already precariously balanced mind. After two days, I have had enough. If you manage to pry anything out of that little savage's feeble mind—which I doubt—I would like to hear about it. But not until then!"

He strode majestically out. Behind him, Merrilyn's protruding tongue saluted his departure.

"Now look, Miss—" Ledrik began.

Merrilyn smiled dazzlingly. "Just call me Merrilyn."

"But you said that the proper form of address was 'Miss,' " Ledrik objected.

"Oh, that!" She dismissed the idea with an airy wave of her hand. "I didn't know you very well then. Call me Merrilyn."

"All right, Merrilyn. Now then—"

"And I'll call you Ledrik."

"Fine. Now—"

"That's a peculiar name, though."

"What?" Ledrik looked startled. His cognomen was a code symbol, not a name in the ordinary Earthly sense. Merrilyn's statement sounded as odd to him as it would have if someone said to an Earthman: "My, what a funny Social Security number you have!"

After a moment's consideration, he said: "Yes, I suppose it does sound peculiar to you. However, let's get on with—"

"Did your mother give it to you, or your father?"

"Give *what* to me?"

"Your *name*, silly!"

"The Government gave it to me. Now will you *please* stop asking questions and help me figure out where your home is?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"I want—*Oh, Great Snell!*" Ledrik buried his face in his hands and mumbled to himself.

"Are you sick or something?" Merrilyn asked solicitously.

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Ledrik gathered his shattered patience together with conscious effort and lifted his head.

"No," he said, forcing a smile, "I am not sick." *Yet!* he added mentally. "Uh—shall we proceed?"

Merrilyn nodded brightly.

Ledrik frowned. "Do you have any idea why Koreil and Bort landed on your planet?"

Merrilyn shook her head. "I never saw them. I told you the ship was deserted when I found it."

"Well, we think we know. Their job is to survey the Galaxy and chart it—dust clouds, clusters, and so forth. In doing this, they also check the spectral characteristics of every star they come close to. They can tell by that method just how stable a star is. If it looks as though it might go nova, they are supposed to see if it has any inhabited planets."

"What do they do if it does?"

"They put in a call for the Stellar Engineers. The engineers take a piece out of the center of the sun by rotating it into hyperspace. That gets rid of the extra energy, and the sun doesn't explode, see?"

Merrilyn, for the first time, realized her predicament. Her home world was in danger of being burned up—friends, relatives, her father. She began to look frightened.

"Do you think Sol really might be going to explode?"

Ledrik looked grim. "There would be no other reason for their landing on your planet."

"Oh, golly!" Merrilyn threw her brain into high gear. "Look here! If those men's job was to survey the Galaxy, won't there be records on the ship to show where they are going?"

"There should be," said Ledrik dryly. "Unfortunately, when you were trying to find out how the ship worked, you pressed the General Erase stud on the recorder. All the records are blank."

"Then what'll we *do?*" Merrilyn asked anxiously.

Ledrik rubbed a forefinger over his chin. "There is one way."

"What's that?"

Ledrik looked at her. "Listen," he said intensely, "how much astronomical knowledge have you been exposed to? By that, I mean have you heard lectures, read books, seen photographs, or anything else which might be buried in your memory?"

Merrilyn laughed. "Millions of things! My Dad is a physician by profession and an

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astronomer by inclination. I've heard him lecture, talk, discuss, read, live, eat, and sleep astronomy all my life. But I never paid any attention to it."

Ledrik took a deep breath. "Good. Then we might find it by psychoprobe."

"What's that?"

"Well, it's a process whereby we dig into your subconscious mind and find that information. It's all there; you just can't remember it. We use the psychoprobe in school to keep students' memories near the surface, where they are available at any time. That increases their thinking ability."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not a bit. Every person in the Organized Galaxy is exposed to it as a child."

"If it will improve my mind," said Merrilyn decisively, "I'll take it."

Rupert VanDale looked over Cartwright's shoulder at his notes and said: "Well, Dr. Cartwright, what's the verdict?"

Cartwright frowned at the papers in his hands, then looked up at VanDale. "Funny. Except for the blood tests, I'd say they were simply healthy specimens of ordinary men. But the blood—"

"What about it?"

"Well, excluding the Rh factor and a few things like that, there are two main factors in the blood. We call them A and B. A human being can have either one in his blood, or both, or neither. That gives you four blood types: A, B, AB, and O.

"I won't go into the testing, but these men don't have any type of blood found on Earth. The factor in it is neither A nor B. Call it C, if you want."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I've taken better than a pint of blood from both of them for lab tests. They don't have Earth blood types."

The SSP chief was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Would you say that these tests confirm their story?"

Cartwright shrugged. "It gives it a lot of weight in my book."

"I see." VanDale scowled. "Let's go talk to those men. You have convinced me, Doctor, that they are *not* international spies."

In the detention ward of the Government Hospital of New Bellevue, two very unhappy citizens of the Organized Galaxy were brooding over their impossible situation.

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Bort was looking out of the window of the hospital, staring angrily through the heavy bars. "Damn!" he said sharply.

Koreil dropped a magazine to the floor. "I'll go along with that!"

Bort turned. "Of all the dim-witted, feeble-minded, stupid, ignorant, fuzz-brained—" He went with his tirade in language which would not only be unfit to translate into print, but some of which could not be properly translated at all.

"Agreed," said Koreil. "The point is, what are we going to do about it? Everything we try to tell that VanDale bastard is greeted with the greatest of sneers. Frankly, I don't care if their damned planet does get vaporized! I don't think it will do the rest of the race any good to have this planetful of mentally myopic morons bred back into it."

"Yeah," said Bort bitterly. "The only trouble with that is that if Earth gets vaporized, we get vaporized with it. I don't particularly care for the idea."

"They've kept us in this room for five days. We've had our blood tested, our heads examined, and our reflexes probed. We've been questioned, insulted, and ignored. We've been X-rayed, relayed, and parlayed. And we aren't any further toward getting off this planet than we were the first night. Fooey!"

"Sh! They're coming! Be diplomatic!" Bort had seen the approach of the two Earthmen through the four-inch square of reinforced glass in the door.

Cartwright and VanDale unlocked the door, locked it behind them, and smiled politely at the two Galactics.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Koreil, Mr. Bort." VanDale nodded to each in turn.

The Galactics returned the greeting and waited.

The SSP man waved them to the chairs. "Sit down, gentlemen. We have some news for you."

As VanDale explained the blood tests, Cartwright sat with his notes in his hand—but he wasn't thinking of them. He was thinking: *Merrilyn, Merrilyn, please come home!*

No trace! But people don't just vanish without leaving a clue. They have to go *somewhere*. And when they go, they have to leave *some* evidence behind. In Merrilyn's case, there was none.

Cartwright was roused

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from his introspection; one of the prisoners—Bort—was speaking.

"Look, Mr. VanDale, I'm certainly glad that you're convinced of our story. Now if you'll just give us our spaceship back, we can call Kandoris for a Stellar Engineering fleet."

VanDale closed his eyes. "We do not have your spaceship, Mr. Bort. We have never *seen* your spaceship. Why do you think we took it? An Earthman couldn't possibly control a ship like that."

"I don't see why not," Koreil objected. "You don't have to know a device's internal workings to operate it. That ship is as easy to drive as one of your helicopters."

"How do you know one of your own people didn't take it?" VanDale countered, controlling his temper.

"If there were other Galactics on this planet, we would have known about it," Bort said positively.

"Do your own people know where you are now?" VanDale asked.

"No. We didn't—"

"Then if you can be here without your own home knowing where you are, how could you know there weren't any others here when you landed?" VanDale made his point by jabbing a finger offensively at Bort's nose.

"Just a minute," Koreil put in, before Bort could erupt with a scathing reply. "Look at it this way: We are marooned on a planet of a sun that is about to go nova. If you don't have our ship, that leaves only one alternative. You give us the materials to build a subradio, and we'll call Kandoris with that."

"Build a *what?*"

"A subradio. That's as close a translation as I can give."

"Do you mean you could build a radio with a range of several thousand light years with our materials?"

"I think so," said Koreil. "They aren't very complicated."

VanDale looked shrewd. "Very well, gentlemen; I'll get you the things you need. After all, we don't want our sun to blow up, do we?"

He got up to leave, and Cartwright followed, amazed by the stuffy little man's about-face. In the hall, Cartwright said: "Then you're convinced these men are telling the truth."

"Of course not!" VanDale snapped. "I am convinced that they are extraterrestrials, but I can see through their little game.

"Something happened to

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their spaceship when they landed, so they need another radio. You heard what that Bort said about calling in a fleet, didn't you? An invasion fleet, naturally!"

"Then you're not going to let them build it?"

"I didn't say that." VanDale's expression was that of the well-known cat-eating canary. "We can learn a great deal by letting them build the radio while an expert is watching."

A sinking feeling manifested itself in Cartwright's stomach. "What expert did you have in mind?"

"Channing Gosmith, naturally. Who else?"

Kandoris, Merrilyn decided, was a fascinating place. As capitol of the Galaxy, its sole purpose was government. Ledrik had escorted her on a tour of the relatively small area of the planet that housed the Galactic Survey Service. It was about half the size of the state of Ohio. The spaceport alone covered an area of better than one thousand square miles.

But in spite of her interest, her main desire was to get home. She and Ledrik were discussing it at breakfast one morning.

"We'll get you home eventually, you know," he said quietly.

She nodded, without looking at him. "I know. But will it still be there?"

"That we don't know."

During the past weeks, the psychoprobing had changed Merrilyn's thinking a great deal. All her memories had been dug out of her subconscious and arranged for easy reference. Her intelligence was being greatly improved by the Kandorian psychologists.

And she knew that Earth's sole chance for survival lay in her. No one else could find it. Not that she thought of herself as a world-saver. She had once turned in a fire alarm when she saw a burning house, but she hardly thought she deserved a medal.

"Ledrik," she said suddenly, "you could find Earth if Koreil and Bort had a subradio, couldn't you?"

"Naturally." Koreil spread his hands. "But how could they? You took their only subradio with you."

"They could build one."

"On Earth? With what?" His voice was scornful.

Merrilyn's eyes blazed. "You make me mad, Ledrik! Earth isn't as backward as you think. We've got interplanetary rockets, electronic

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communication, and cybernetic brains. We may not have interstellar vessels or such things as that, but we're not stupid."

Ledrik frowned in thought. "It might be possible, at that. I'll tell you what; we'll keep all channels open, and put in a recorded call for them. That will give them something to tighten their beam on."

Merrilyn smiled to herself and finished her breakfast.

When they had both put away the last bite, Ledrik said: "We'd better get over to Psychology Section, Merrilyn. Ready?"

"I guess so." She didn't particularly like the psychoprobing itself, but for what it was doing to her mind, it was worth it.

Fifteen minutes later, Merrilyn was in Psychology, placing herself in the hands of the women operators.

Merrilyn smiled and spoke to them as they got the records from the files. Like all Kandorian women, their names had a prefix which indicated their sex. Unfortunately, the prefix was identical in sound to a certain English word which had a long, if somewhat dishonorable history in the language, having come down almost unchanged from the Anglo-Saxon. Merrilyn didn't like to say the word, so she had nicknamed the three operators Tup, Yasef, and Zedahg, which were simply abbreviations of their full names.

Yasef was the head of the Psych team assigned to Merrilyn, and the only one who spoke English. Even so, she didn't talk it as well as Ledrik, who was a trained linguist. Yasef's Kandorian accent sounded somewhat like a French accent.

"Are we ready for ze treatment?" she asked smiling.

"Sure," Merrilyn grinned back weakly.

"'Ow dos ze 'ead feel? Bettair, yes?"

"*Oui*—I mean, yes." She thought: *So help me, if that woman ever calls me* cherie, *I will probably burst into hysterical laughter.*

She lay back on a padded couch and was lowered into a tank of heavy, warm liquid. Then an electrode helmet was lowered over her head, covering her eyes. A faint subsonic beat throbbed through her muscles, massaging them into relaxation. Then there was an almost inaudible hum from the helmet.

Merrilyn felt deliciously sleepy.

"Damn!" wailed Bort.

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"Germanium? I never heard of making transistors out of germanium!"

"How about quartz-carbon?" Channing Gosmith asked.

"How should I know? Use salt for all I care!"

It had been going on like that for days. Gosmith had accepted the assignment with reluctance, but when he found that the Galactics were going to build a new kind of radio, he perked up his ears. Channing Gosmith was an electronics man to the core.

But he soon found out that whatever in the devil they were building, it was certainly not a radio. Also, it was not a phonograph, a radarscope, a lie detector, a camera, or an eggbeater. It had leads that went nowhere, and leads that went where they shouldn't. Ohm's Law didn't work on it, and neither did Maxwell's Equations.

And he could not quite bring himself to believe that the communicator that was supposed to contact the stars was powered by a three-volt battery.

But when an oscilloscope showed that the gadget was a perfect square-wave generator, he smuggled eight cases of beer into the lab, sat down and watched.

Slowly, the thing shaped up. Koreil said that a subradio was about a foot cube, but it would be bigger than that, using Earth's equipment. It wound around the room like the strands in a floss-candy spinner.

And through it all, Bort cursed. He would try to explain to Gosmith what he wanted, but the words for his needs weren't in the English language. Then Bort would blow his stack.

For instance:

"Mr. Gosmith, we need a pair of—uh—groupers."

Gosmith poured himself a glass of beer. "What?"

"Maybe you call them something else. Here, I'll show you." He leaned over the desk and made marks on a sheet of paper. "You take a circuit series coming in here and group them together with a feedback so the oscillations are damped out by being out of phase by a variable angle."

Gosmith blinked. "So what happens?"

"Well, then, you have interposed a modulated carrier which—"

"Wait a minute! Where did that carrier come from?"

"Oh. Back here, you see. Where the electronic flux is disappearing. You get a frequency modulated wave out

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the other side on a single circuit instead of the multiple amplitude modulation circuits. See?"

Gosmith took a swallow of beer. "No, I don't. It doesn't make sense."

"*Why* doesn't it?" Bort fought to keep calm. "You can see that it's reflected through the phase repulsor."

Gosmith looked at his beer, the drawing, and back at Bort. "What, may I ask, is a phase repulsor?"

"Maybe I didn't translate right. Frequency reflector? Wavelength screen?"

Gosmith thought he saw the light. "You mean a choke coil. Stops AC, lets DC through."

"No, no. It lets the current through, but reflects the wave back along the circuit in the opposite direction."

Gosmith drank the rest of his beer in one draft. "You can't do that," he said complacently.

Bort exploded. "I'll be damned if you can't! I'll be—"

"Bort," said Koreil calmly, "we'll have to build them."

Bort choked off. "Very well," he said in a strained voice, "Mr. Gosmith, can you get us some cube-lattice quartz crystals?"

Gosmith poured another beer. "Some *what?*"

And so it went. The Galactics spent most of their time making tools to make the raw materials to make the components of their subradio. The thing took up most of the lab by the time it was finished, but at last it was finished, balanced, tested, and ready to go.

Bort rubbed his hands together gleefully. "That's it, Mr. Gosmith! All set to go!" He didn't realize that his voice was carrying to hidden microphones.

Thirty seconds later, three SSP men burst into the room with levelled revolvers. "Get away from there," said the leader.

The Galactics raised their hands. "What's the idea?" asked Bort.

"You're not going to use that thing to call in an invasion force, buddy. Now come along with us."

"WHAT?" Bort bellowed. "*We can't use it?* Don't you realize we've got to get help before the sun goes nova? Pretty soon, it'll be too late!"

"Hooey!" snapped the SSP man. "Now shut up and come along!"

Two of the agents pushed the protesting Galactics out the door, and the leader turned to Gosmith. "It's your baby now, sir. Good work."

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He followed the others out the door.

Channing Gosmith surveyed the haywired subradio. "Hello, you queer thing, you," he said gloomily.

Commander Kenson looked at the tri-di image of the Galaxy. "It still leaves a devil of a lot of territory to search."

Ledrik nodded. "But it's the best we could do from the clues in Merrilyn's mind. It's not her fault; it's just that we don't know that much about that area of the Galaxy."

"Well," said the Commander heavily, "at least it can be done in a reasonable length of time."

Merrilyn, sitting in a corner of the room, smiled. "How long a time, Commander?" she asked in perfect Kandorian.

The Commander looked at her, then back at Ledrik. "You didn't tell me she could speak Kandorian."

Ledrik shrugged. "She's been pulling stuff like that all the time lately. If all Earthmen are as inherently intelligent as that, we'll have a planetful of geniuses on our hands."

"Well, how long will it take?" Merrilyn persisted.

"Hmmm." The commander looked intently at the image of the Galaxy. "We'll have to search every star of Sol's spectral class in that area. I should say at least a month."

Merrilyn shook her head. "Not if I go along. I can tell by the constellations if we're close or not. That will cut it down quite a bit."

"Ahem!" Kenson coughed. "I hardly think that a Galactic Patrol cruiser is the proper place for a young lady."

"Nuts to that!" Merrilyn stormed. "You listen here, you stuffy old goat! If I'm on that ship, I can tell in a minute if we're in the right area or not! I suppose you think it's dangerous to bring a girl on board a ship with a lot of men. What's the matter, Commander? Have you no discipline in the Galactic Patrol?"

A crack like that can sting any officer of an organization that claims to have pride in itself, be he Roman Centurion or a commander in the Galactic Patrol. Kenson stiffened visibly.

Then he stood and said darkly: "Very well, my dear, you may come. We leave in half an hour." He turned and stalked out.

There is a solar phenomenon, well known to astronomers, known as "the Earth

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effect." Odd as it may seem, the number of sunspots originating on the side of the Sun facing Earth is considerably smaller than the number of spots originating on the side opposite. Why? Nobody knows. But it *does* happen, and astronomers can depend on it.

Therefore, when, on August 2nd, the Earth effect reversed itself, the astronomers became curious.

And when, in the next thirty-six hours, the sun became blotched with big, nasty-looking sunspots, the astronomers became excited.

And when, on August 5th, huge prominences began to burst from the surface of Old Sol, the astronomers became alarmed.

And it was early on the morning of the fifth that three men sat listening to an amazing maze of wires speak in an unknown tongue.

"Fili ninon sisok, Koreil ol Bort. Goslul orril." Over and over the words repeated themselves.

Rupert VanDale looked shrewd and speculative; Dr. Cartwright looked haggard and worried; Channing Gosmith looked confused.

"You're sure the transmitter isn't on?" VanDale asked Gosmith sharply.

"I am not. I'm not sure of anything about that misformed, malfunctioning mystery mechanism. For all I know, that voice is the first stages of delirium tremens." He lit a cigarette and waggled it toward the subradio. "But I don't *think* it's transmitting, no. That's a recorded voice. It keeps repeating until somebody answers. That implies a device which will detect an incoming signal, shut off the record, and notify whoever wants to talk to our two Galactics. Since it hasn't shut off, they haven't received any signal from us."

"I see." VanDale nodded. "You are convinced, then, that this mechanism is picking up a voice from somewhere forty thousand light-years away?"

Gosmith considered a moment before he answered. "I'm convinced," he said at last, "that nobody in the known Solar System ever constructed a radio like that; it must come from the stars." He paused, glaring at the subradio. "But I refuse to believe that that mess is picking up ten to the minus fortieth of a single quantum and amplifying it to that voice!"

It was at that moment that an SSP agent popped into the room waving a sheet of paper.

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"Chief! Look! This just came over the teletype!"

VanDale grabbed the message and read:

HARVARD OBSERVATORY — APR 6 — DR. S. R. DIXON ANNOUNCED THAT INCREASED SUNSPOT ACTIVITY MAY BE DUE TO SOLAR IMBALANCE. "THE SUN," HE SAID, "IS POURING OUT ENERGY AT AN INCREASED RATE, WHICH MAY PRESAGE AN ACTUAL NOVA CONDITION."

OTHER ASTRONOMERS REFUSE TO MAKE ANY POSITIVE STATEMENTS, BUT WILL NOT CONTRADICT DIXON. DR. P. LATHAM, OF PALOMAR, WAS QUOTED AS SAYING: "ALL THE EVIDENCE IS NOT YET IN; NO PREDICTION CAN BE MADE ON THE FUTURE OF THE SUN."

"*Yike!*" VanDale screeched. "Get those two Galactics up here quick! Move, dammit! *Move!*"

The agent moved. When he brought in the two prisoners, VanDale showed them the teletype. "I guess I was wrong," he said nervously.

"You're stinking well right, you were wrong!" Bort snarled. "You're the stubbornest ass on this whole goddam planet!"

Koreil said: "I'm afraid your apology is a little late, Mr. VanDale. We'll make the call, but it won't be for the Stellar Engineers. It's too late! By the time they get here, any fooling around with that ball of high-flux nuclear energy up there, and the Earth would simply be gone all the quicker."

"Who'll you call?" VanDale asked, his face whitening.

"Migration Service, the Galactic Patrol! We may be able to get ten or fifteen million people off the Earth before it goes *blooey!* That will leave two billion to burn to death."

"I see," said VanDale. "Naturally, I would not expect to go."

"Naturally," snapped Bort. "Now let's get at that subradio!"

Channing Gosmith waved at it. "There you go, laddies. Have a look at your monster."

Bort took one look. "What in the name of the Almighty Snell did you do to it?"

"Where? Oh, that." Gosmith shrugged. "I just did what VanDale told me to do; I disconnected the transmitter from the receiver."

Bort gave VanDale a look that held murder seething beneath it. Then he looked at Gosmith. "Well, don't just stand there! Grab a soldering

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iron! Koreil, hand me that screwdriver!"

The three men went to work, Gosmith following Bort's orders without question.

As they worked, they paid little attention to what went on around them; they only asked VanDale to stay the hell out of their way. So when an SSP man walked in and whispered something to his chief, they ignored him.

They were a little annoyed when VanDale cleared his throat and said: "Er—gentlemen, didn't you tell me you came here in a spaceship and landed in Central Park?"

Bort looked dangerous. "No," he said softly, "we pedaled our way across the Milky Way on a bicycle and landed on the tip of the Eiffel Tower at high noon."

"Heh heh," VanDale smiled weakly. "Heh heh. Yes. Well, I thought you might like to know that your spaceship has come back. It's in Central Park now."

"This is it," said Merrilyn positively. "See, there's Cassiopea and Ursa Major and Gemini and—"

The star toward which they were heading was brightening visibly as the ship moved in slowly.

"I hope you're right," he said apprehensively.

An intercom speaker at his desk said: "Engineering, sir! That's the star, all right! Nova signals increasing steadily!"

Merrilyn clenched her fists and shut her eyes. *No, dear God, please, not yet! Let us get there in time!*

The mighty fleet of Stellar Engineering ships, following the Patrol flagships, swept in toward Sol. Kenson gave the command and the Engineers took over. There was nothing more a Patrol cruiser could do.

"We made it just in time, Commander," said the Chief Engineer. "Another hour, and we'd have been too late."

The fleet englobed the sun at a distance of ten million miles. From each ship, tractor and pressor beams leaped out, locking together in a tight network of energy. Then more beams plunged deep into the center of the raging star.

A small—very small—section of the sun's center left normal space and was precipitated into hyperspace. Instantly, free from the fantastic pressure of the sun's mass, the ball of ultra-hot, ultra-dense material exploded—violently.

But the explosion was in

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hyperspace, where it could do no harm. It couldn't even be detected.

Old Sol, freed of her excess energy, relaxed. Her skin was still mottled from the effects of her internal fever, but the rash would go away in a few days.

Merrilyn breathed a huge sigh of relief as the Engineers reported that the sun was safe. "Now what? she asked the commander.

He grinned. "We'll take you home, young lady. And — ahh—" His grin became sheepish. "—apologize for some of the things I said. If you hadn't come along, we never would have made it in time. You're a pretty smart young woman.

"But" — he frowned — "when we get home, I hope your father warms your fundament—but good."

"Just so we get home" Merrilyn grinned.

The Engineer fleet, their job done, turned about and headed back to Kandoris while the Patrol battle crusier swung toward Earth.

"Now, just exactly where on your planet did you find the Survey ship?" the commander asked. "I imagine Koreil and Bort will be nearby somewhere."

Merrilyn located Central Park from a height of a hundred miles as the cruiser swept around the Earth. Then Kenson ordered it dropped into the center of the Park, just as Koreil and Bort had done.

But, whereas the Survey ship had been only thirty feet long, and had landed at night with full screening, the cruiser was as big as the *Queen Mary* and was landing in broad daylight.

Earthmen are used to seeing spaceships, but not when they try to land in Central Park, and not when they float down like a barrage balloon with a slow leak.

By the time the ship landed, there was a hell of a crowd. And when a crowd gathers in New York, you will find a policeman there before long. The ship had barely settled on its tail end when a large, blue-uniformed gentleman was pounding on the airlock.

"Open up in there! You're under arrest!" He waved a hand at the sign that said KEEP OFF THE GRASS. "Open in the name of the law!"

It was Triggerhappy Lou.

The commander couldn't hear him, of course; not through the airlock. But it

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so happened that he and Merrilyn were about to step out at that moment.

"Here we are, my dear," he said. "Already a crowd has gathered to thank us. Koreil and Bort have evidently told them what we have done."

The heavy slab of metal slid silently open, and Commander Kenson stepped out smiling. He did not smile long. Patrolman Luigi Petrelli took one look and acted. He saw the iridescent uniform, the pink boots, and the sidearm and his reaction was automatic.

Fleet Commander Kenson of the Galactic Patrol found himself looking into the muzzle of Triggerhappy Lou's Police Positive.

But this time, Triggerhappy Lou was not so fortunate. He was not attempting to arrest an unarmed man, but a man who had behind him the armed might of a heavy Patrol battle cruiser.

In a gun blister high up on the side of the towering spaceship, a Marine gunner aimed carefully with a stun beam and squeezed the activator. There was a faint hum in the air.

Luigi lowered his gun, smiled stupidly at absolutely nothing whatsoever and collapsed on the grass—not ten feet from the KEEP OFF sign.

By this time, the monstrous ship was attracting even more widespread attention. Some were even calling attention to the fact that the ship was not touching the ground, but was poised a good two inches above it.

Commander Kenson had, of course, jumped back into the airlock at the first sign of hostilities and closed the port behind him.

"Great Snell! Is everybody on this planet goofy?" He raced back up to the control room and surveyed the park through the viewplate, where he could see that a cordon of police had surrounded the ship. Below, Sergeant O'Malley was shaking Triggerhappy Lou.

"Petrelli! Wake up!" He noticed the foolish smile that still lingered on the face of the fallen officer and turned to a bystander. "Did they shoot him?"

"Nah, sarge. De copper just keeled over. He ain't hoit. Fainted, I think."

Other eyewitnesses agreed. None of them had seen the Space Marine fire his stunner.

O'Malley was smelling the unfortunate Petrelli's breath when another-copter dropped to the green. His eyes widen-

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ed as he saw it was a Government job. Quickly, he dragged Trigger-happy behind the KEEP OFF sign and walked toward the copter as five men piled out of it.

He recognized the men immediately.

VanDale said: "All right, Sergeant, I'll take over. Keep these people back." He turned to Koreil. "Is this your ship?"

Koreil was gazing up at the ship that spired loftily into the air above them. "That? Great Snell, *no*, chum! That happens to be a Galactic Patrol Cruiser!"

"Galactic Pat—" VanDale swallowed.

Koreil and Bort waved vigorously toward the visiplate pickups. The airlock door opened again, and Commander Kenson came out, flanked by a squad of armed Space Marines.

VanDale decided at that point that it was time to show his authority. It was his duty to welcome these men from another star. He smiled, strode rapidly toward the commander, and stuck out his hand in a gesture of welcome.

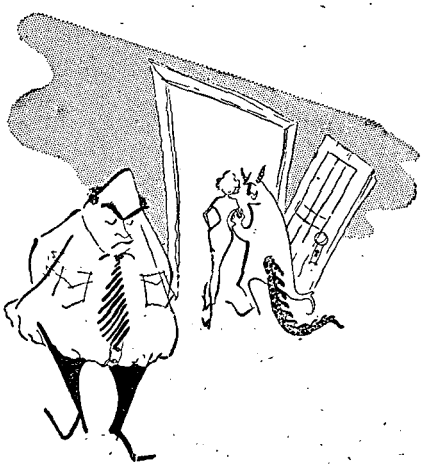
But the Marine gunners in the blisters were ready for him. They couldn't tell, from there, whether the Earthman was armed or not, but you can't take chances with a barbarian.

A stunner cut VanDale down in mid-stride. His lifted leg went forward, throwing him into a beautiful somersault. He flipped over on the grass, ending up flat on his back, his feet only a few inches from Commander Kenson's shiny pink boots.

Kenson gazed at the supine figure, then called to the two stranded Surveymen. "Is it safe?"

"Reasonably," said Koreil. "I'm sure glad to see you. We're Survey Service; we—"

"I know all about it," Kenson said sourly. "Why do you think we're here? Fine Sur-



"There's something strange about that young man."

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veymen you are! Getting stranded!"

"But Commander! They stole our ship!"

"Stole it, hell! It was accidentally borrowed by a seventeen-year-old girl who opened the lock with a flashlight!"

"A seventeen - year - old girl!" Bort looked shocked.

"Here she comes now," Kenson said unnecessarily.

The crowd became quiet as an exceptionally beautiful brunette in a provocatively revealing Kandorian dress stepped out of the airlock.

Dr. Samuel Cartwright, world-famous rocketeer, fearless explorer of alien Mars, recognized the daughter he had not seen for four years, and the shock was too much for him. He keeled over in a dead faint to join Trigger-happy Lou and Rupert Van-Dale on the grass.

"So that's what happened, ladies and gentlemen," Kenson said. We're glad we were able to get here in time to prevent the explosion and save Earth from disaster."

The TV camera panned around to take in the men, coming finally to rest on Merrilyn. The audience cheered, and the program was over. Immediately, reporters were crowding around the commander and the two Surveymen for the promised press conference.

Dr. Cartwright took his daughter's hand. "Let's get out of the studio, honey. I want something to eat." He turned to Gosmith. "Coming, Channing?"

"Not yet, Sam," he said, with a dreamy look in his eyes. "I'm going to see if I can get into subradio engineering on Kandoris. Maybe they'll send me to school."

Cartwright led his daughter out of the studio and into a waiting copter. "It must have been pretty frightening, wasn't it, darling?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'll say. But after the psychoprobe treatment, I don't think I'll ever be that afraid again."

She proved her statement three days later when she borrowed her father's pistol without his knowing it, and went for a walk in Central Park. At ten-thirty that night, Sergeant O'Malley was surprised to see an unkempt man with odd fish-blue eyes come marching into the precinct station with his hands raised, followed by Cartwright holding a levelled pistol.

"I want to prefer charges against this bum," she said.

THE END

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THE WASP

By

Richard Wilson

Beyond all doubt Man is the boss of the universe. The entire cosmos awaits his every decision, his every move. In his own good time he will move from planet to planet, from galaxy to galaxy, and nothing shall successfully stand in his way. (What was that? Sounded like a dissenting voice.)

THE wasp went *zzz* inside the windshield and the driver noticed the insect for the first time. He was going around a curve at 45 so he didn't do anything about it just then. When the road was straight again the man, who was alone in the car, leaned over and rolled down the window on the right. The little ventilating window on the left was already open. The man waved his hand, not too close to the wasp, as if to indicate to it the way to freedom.

The wasp went *zzz* again, and ignored the open window. It continued to beat its wings against the windshield.

Twice more, when traffic permitted, the man tried to communicate to the wasp that there was a way out. The second time the wasp buzzed furiously, on a crescendo, and the man decided to let well enough be. He'd never been bitten, but this could be the first time, if he made the wasp sufficiently angry.

The wasp stopped buzzing, after a while, and began to walk idly around on top of the dashboard. The insect must have got into the car while it was parked next to the house, before he started to drive into the city. It was a hot day and he'd left the windows open so it wouldn't be stifling when he started out.

A familiar road marker whizzed past and the driver knew it meant he'd gone ten miles. Almost half way. He'd measured the distance once and knew it was exactly 22.2 miles from home to where he parked the car and took a sub-

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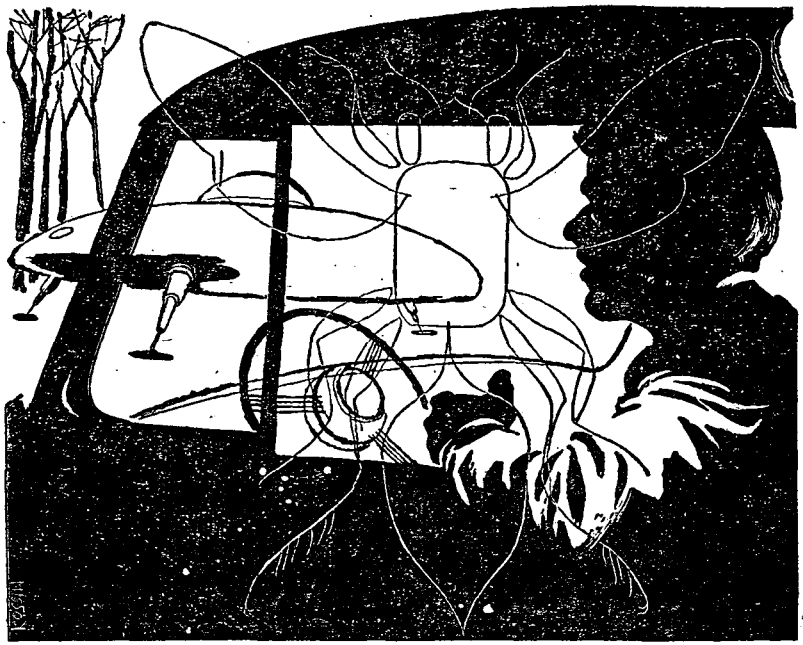

way the rest of the way into the city.

He wondered now if the wasp's home was the same as his. There was a wasps' nest up under the eaves, high enough not to be a bother to anybody. If he shooed the insect out now it would be far from home, even as a wasp flies, and he had no idea how fast that was. It might never find its way back. It might not even find another wasp colony —if that was the right term —and if it did, it might not be accepted.

Ordinarily he'd be listening to the car radio, and would have forgotten the wasp as soon as it stopped buzzing. But the radio had gone on the blink a week ago and he had not had time to get it fixed. So there was room in his mind for his little fantasy about the displaced wasp.

On an impulse he leaned over and rolled the right-hand window shut. He decided he'd keep the wasp in the car and take it home with him when he went back. He'd be in the city on business a few hours and then the two of them—he and the wasp—would start back.

The motions of rolling up

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the window stirred the wasp into flight. It buzzed in front of his face, then around his head and then, perversely, against the window he'd just closed.

"Fool wasp," the man said, half fondly. "I'll get you home in spite of yourself."

The man with the rifle was obviously a hunter. Or, to put it less kindly, a poacher. The season was over and he had no business wandering around in the game preserve. Not with a gun, anyhow.

He hadn't found anything to shoot and he was irritable under the hot mid-day sun. He'd been up since before dawn and he was tired as well. He'd come a long way on foot.

He was plodding along, muttering to himself, when he saw the reflection of the sun on some big metal thing in a clearing ahead. Some kind of building, apparently; though he couldn't imagine what it would be doing out here in the middle of nowhere.

He walked a little faster and, as the thing came into better perspective, he realized that it wasn't a building at all. He reached the edge of the clearing and saw the thing in full. He knew what it was, now, but he wasn't ready to admit it, even to himself.

It *looked* like a spaceship, sure. At least, it looked like spaceships he'd seen in the movies and magazines and comic strips. But he was damned if he was going to accept such a thing in reality.

He'd read about space research in the papers and about the man-made satellite they were talking about putting up above the atmosphere so they could keep an eye on the whole world. But that was just talk. Nobody's built one.

But somebody'd built this one. It stood there—indisputable. Whatever it was.

There were no shacks around it, as there would have been if somebody had built it there. There were no signs of a camera crew or actors or any other paraphernalia of a movie company. In fact there were no signs of anything except the ship, sleek, silvery, standing on its tail in the clearing.

Its door—port, whatever you called it—was open. He couldn't see anybody inside. There were temporary metal steps leading up to the port.

He stood there, not trying to hide, but not making himself conspicuous either, for a long time before he went over to get a closer look. Nothing had moved.

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He went to the foot of the steps and looked and listened. Still nothing. He went up the steps and stood just inside the port. Nobody.

Everything was gleaming silver inside. Spic and span. A passageway led up, in a spiral. After debating with himself, the man went up it, holding his rifle firmly.

The passageway seemed to go on interminably and the man was considering turning back when he came to a door. It was closed.

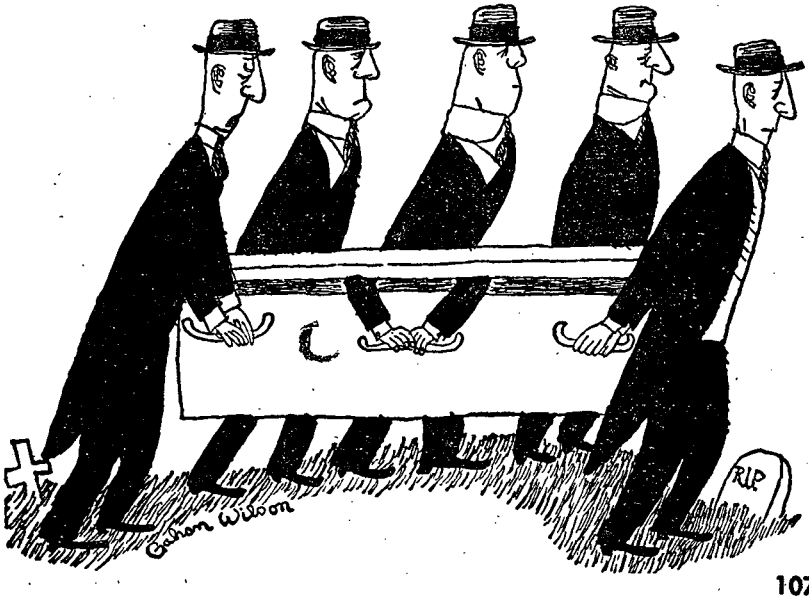
He stopped and listened. He heard nothing.

There was no knob but he pushed against it and it opened.

Nobody here, either. But for the first time there were signs that there had been someone. There was furniture, of a sort. Not chairs, exactly, nor couches, but a cross between the two. They were arranged haphazardly and looked comfortable.

There was a table, or bench, along one wall, with containers on it. Some kind of metal, like strongboxes, the little ones were, and the big ones like safes. All of them were silver, or at least silver-colored.

He went over to them but could find no way to open them. There didn't seem to be any openings, not even a seam.



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He'd had his attention absorbed by the boxes for perhaps two minutes and when he realized that he started, snapped erect and listened intently. Nothing.

There were other things in the room, too, but nothing else made any sense to him.

He tested one of the chair-couches and found it as comfortable as it looked. It, too, was silver, but of a silky fabric over some kind of spongy material.

He rested, telling himself he could listen just as well lying down as standing up. He cradled the rifle across his chest.

He felt himself becoming drowsy but he forced his eyes wide open and strained his ears, in compensation.

He was asleep less than a minute later.

He awoke in alarm to the soft vibrations.

He knew instantly where he was and damned himself for a fool for having dozed off. He sat up quickly and, when the momentary dizziness had passed, went to the door. He put his shoulder against it but it didn't give. Then he remembered that it opened in, not out, and looked for a handle or knob. There was none.

There was artificial light of some kind but he couldn't tell its source. There were no windows. And there was only the one door, as far as he could see. He considered whether a carefully-placed rifle bullet would do any good. If there had been a lock he could have shot it out. But there was no lock, and no indication that a shot would do anything more than give his presence away.

The vibrations had continued all this time. They were muted, as if far off, or well insulated, but they were unmistakably from the ship.

He wondered in sudden panic if it had taken off.

And if it had, he wondered, his fear overcoming his skepticism that it was a spaceship at all, where was it going?

He ran around the room, frantic, doing things aimlessly because he couldn't let himself be carried off and do nothing.

He tried to move the chair-couches, but they were fastened firmly to the metal floor. He picked up and shook the smaller silver-colored boxes and hurled them to the floor. The bigger ones were too heavy to be lifted, but they could be shoved off the table. He shoved them off. They didn't even dent.

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There was a square of paneling on one wall. He leaned the rifle against the wall and pressed against the paneling with both palms, then felt all around it with his fingers, seeking some hidden button or switch. If there was one, he didn't find it.

Finally, exhausted and wild-eyed, he stood in the center of the room. He'd taken up his rifle again and was holding it defensively, ready to swing the barrel in any direction and fire.

He still was standing there, tense and scared, five minutes later when the vibrations stopped.

Now there was complete silence, except for his breathing. This was even worse. His legs began to quiver uncontrollably. He backed against the chair-couch and sat down.

He waited.

His eyes were fixed on the door, the only possible exit, when it began to swing in, slowly.

He began to tremble again but he aimed his rifle at the spot and said hoarsely:

"All right, come in with your hands up."

He felt foolish even as he said the melodramatic words.

He felt even more foolish when the door had fully opened and no one was there.

He got up and went cautiously to the doorway. He put his head out, a half inch at a time, and peered up and down the corridor. Nobody. Nothing. Not a sound.

Gripping the rifle, he walked a few steps to the right. The corridor stretched ahead of him. Then he turned back the way he had come, down the spiral passageway. The port through which he had entered the ship was closed tightly. He hadn't expected anything else, but he had to be sure. He went back up the passageway. The door to the room he had been in was closed again — he pushed against it experimentally — and locked.

He moved on, trying to be silent, through the long corridor. But his heavy shoes made scraping noises which, in the utter quiet, seemed to him to be deafening. So he abandoned his stealthy tread and walked on boldly. As he did so, his courage began to return and when he came to the end of the corridor and found another door he pushed against it without hesitation.

It opened for him.

The creature in the room was lying on a chair-couch. One of the silvery boxes was

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on the floor next to it. A sort of wire tubing led from the box to the creature's face. It seemed to be taking nourishment.

The man and creature looked at each other in silent appraisal. The man made no motion with his rifle. The creature continued to feed.

What the man saw was an almost-person. It had a head, a body, four limbs. There was no clear indication of whether it went on all fours, or upright. None of the extremities was shod and they were a compromise between hands and feet.

The creature spoke. Its speech was a low-keyed ululation which didn't interfere with its feeding.

What the creature was saying to the man, without preamble or a greeting of any kind, was that it had become aware soon after the takeoff that the ship had a stowaway.

The man didn't understand a word of this.

The creature surmised as much and regretted that it wasn't communicating, but it continued to speak as if to show that it was friendly and meant no harm.

"Unfortunately," the creature said, looking at the man with diamond-faceted eyes, "I can't turn back now. The drive's been thrown in and there's the schedule to maintain."

It paused, as if in hope of a reply, but the man said nothing. The creature made no movement except to flex its nether digits slowly and luxuriously.

"My patrol will take me far beyond the solar system," it continued, "and you'll just have to come along. I'll be stopping back in about two years time. Then you'll be home again. In the meantime you'll be well cared for."

The man, not understanding, listened to the alien speech with suspicion. The low howling voice of the creature prickled at the short hairs of his neck. He felt a chill, as he had once when he hunted in a strange forest and a wolf howled at him at night from beyond the circle of his campfire but close behind him.

The man looked behind him suddenly, but there was no one there.

"I'm alone in the ship," the alien said, interpreting the man's motion correctly. "It's time to check the course. Routine. Come along if you like."

The creature went from the couch to the floor with a gen-

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tle motion and gestured for the man to follow. Its gait was not the erect walk of a man nor the trot of a quadruped, but something in between.

The man cowered away as the creature passed him on its way to the door. Then he followed it, warily.

They went along a series of corridors that gleamed in dull silver. The alien looked back occasionally. The man trailed it grimly, the rifle tense in his hands.

"I'm sorry you've been inconvenienced," the creature said, knowing it was not being understood but apparently glad of a chance to talk. "I had picked what I thought was an uninhabited area to set down in and recharge the atmosphere tanks. I've been to your planet several times but never before has the ship been seen, as far as I know."

"By God," the man said aloud, "you give me the creeps. You'd just better not make any funny moves or I'll blow your damn head off."

"You do speak, then," the creature said. "Good. A curious speech and possibly intelligent. I must arrange to record it for study. Maybe your planet has other possibilities. I wonder if yours is the dominant life-form or one of the sub-groups. We might even establish communication before I put you back where I found you."

"That head of yours would make quite a trophy," the man said. "Of course they'd never believe me. They'd think it was a taxidermist's gag."

"This is the control room," the alien said. It gestured and a door opened. It went in and beckoned the man to follow. He did, cautiously.

"Looks like the cockpit, or the bridge, or whatever you'd call it," he said. "If I knocked off this monster, maybe I could learn how to run the thing and get back home."

The creature went to a silvery cube on a three-legged stand and appeared to study it, though the man could see nothing but a clear, smooth surface.

"All well," the creature said. "Would you like to see where we are?" It touched the cube here and there with rapid finger-strokes and a section of the wall became a screen. There, against the star-flecked black of space, was the Moon and, farther away, a green globe that must be Earth.

The man gasped involuntarily. It was as if he believed

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for the first time that the ship had left the ground.

"A pretty sight," the creature said. "Your world is among the most beautiful. We'll explore it one day, when we can fit it into the schedule. Knowing your language, if it is a language, will help then. We could start now, perhaps." It gestured toward the Moon. "Satellite," it said in its howl.

"That's the Moon all right," the man said.

"Smoonawry," the creature echoed. "Interesting." It gestured toward the green globe. "System XI, Planet Three. I suppose you'd call it Earth. Most land-beings use that term for their home planet. Earth," it repeated.

The crooning howl of the alien rose and fell but the man could distinguish nothing that might be a single word.

"I guess we're having a language lesson. But I'm not getting it at all."

"Very difficult, that one," the creature said. It pointed to the Moon again. "Smoonawry."

"Moon."

"Oom. I see, a variation. Possibly one is the generic term and one the specific. We make some progress, my friend. We'll be chatting in a few weeks, I'm sure. Meanwhile I must make you comfortable. You eat, I suppose."

The creature dissolved the wall screen and the man regretfully watched the scene fade. The alien set a silvery box next to a couch, gestured to the man to sit down and offered him the tube that was connected to the box.

The man took the tube and sat. He examined the box and tube critically, then tapped the end of the tube against his palm to see what would come out. Nothing came. Cautiously, but reassured by the fact that the creature had fed from a similar contraption, he put the tube in his mouth. A tepid semi-liquid flowed out instantly and he jerked the tube away.

The liquid was absolutely tasteless, but even the brief sip had given him a sense of well-being. He looked at the creature, which nodded. He put the tube back in his mouth. He fed.

His sense of well-being increased and he put his feet up and lay back. He lowered his rifle to the floor.

After a while, nourished and soothed, he slept.

When he awoke again he did not open his eyes immediately. He luxuriated in the languor that caressed him

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from his head to his toes. He knew where he was but he felt no panic or fear. He was being well taken care of, obviously, as there should be no trouble with the alien, which appeared to be intelligent and friendly.

There was the problem of getting back to Earth, but that could wait. He was a solitary man, with no family and few responsibilities, and this was a bigger adventure than hunting.

He recalled, still with his eyes closed, that he had not felt so composed before he fed by tube from the silvery box. The thought disturbed him. Possibly he had been drugged.

His eyes snapped open.

His body, headless, lay on a table at the other side of the room.

As he watched, horrified and helpless, it flattened and spread, as if a great invisible weight were pressing on it from above.

The body became translucent, so that he could see the organs and bones beneath the skin. It was his own skin, no doubt of it. The body had been stripped of its clothing and he knew it by the hair pattern on the chest and belly and the old appendicitis scar.

But he felt no pain.

His head seemed to be sitting on the severed neck. He could move his eyes, but nothing else.

Above him was another of the ship's ubiquitous silvery cubes which he could see by peering up under his eyebrows. A violet radiation came from it and bathed his head.

He looked down, fearfully, but there was no blood.

The alien came into the room then. It didn't look at the head, but went directly to the table on which the flattened, transparent body lay. It examined the body with great interest, touching it lightly here and there with its fingers. The man felt nothing.

But his mind was crying out with indignity and terror. To his eyes, fifteen feet or more from his distorted body, the creature had become an evil monster. This thing, this alien he had once almost felt he could trust, had decapitated him and made a travesty of his destroyed body.

The creature turned then and saw that the eyes in the head were open.

"You're awake!" it said in concern. "Oh, I'm sorry."

To the man, the alien's expression was one of sadistic glee.

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"I was sure you'd sleep until long after I'd finished recording you," the alien said. "Different metabolism, I suppose."

It seemed to try to read the expression in the man's eyes.

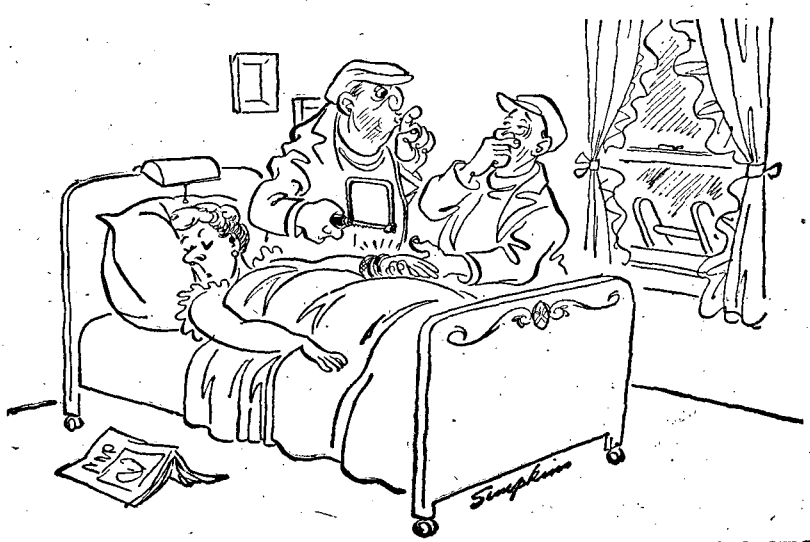
"You're familiar with this device, I hope," it said. "If you're not it must come as a great shock to you." It looked back at the body. "Yes, the heart beats unnaturally fast and the breathing is agitated. Oh, I am sorry."

The low howl of alien speech seemed to the man to be the ritual chant of a savage diverting itself with another's torture.

"We must put you together again," the creature said. "I know it must appear to you that your head has been severed and your body crushed, but it's all an optical illusion, really. It's our Diagnosticon. It's rather a new device, but quite efficient and above all harmless. By means of it I've recorded your body functions completely. And that violet beam at your head is recording what it can of your mind. I'm not a doctor, or I'd explain it better. But then, of course, you don't understand me at all."

The alien went to a wall panel and fingered a bank of switches.

The violet light went out and instantly the man was himself again, his head attached to his trunk. He lay on the table, no longer flat, and



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the cubic table across the room on which his head had stood now was empty.

Sensation returned to him. His body was crawling with the sensation of a thousand insects on naked flesh. He sat up quickly. His clothing was piled neatly on a couch and his rifle lay on the floor beside it.

He didn't stop to think why he should be whole again, but leaped off the table and snatched up his trousers. He put them on, yanked up the zipper and then grabbed the rifle.

He fired point blank at the creature. The bullet missed by an inch.

"Please," the alien said. "I have not hurt you."

The second bullet creased the creature's shoulder.

"But I *can* hurt you," the creature warned. "I have no special feelings about you. There are millions more of your kind." It fingered a belt at its waist.

A third rifle shot rang out.

Simultaneously the creature tightened its fingers and the man flew apart under a burst of glittering radiation.

The alien shrugged.

"He could have been interesting company," it said.

It swept the pieces of the shattered man together and dumped them into a disposal cube.

The driver of the car reached the parking near the subway entrance. The wasp was on the dashboard again.

The man parked the car. He put the gear shift into neutral, wiggled it to be sure, took his foot off the clutch, pulled up the hand brake, took his foot off the brake pedal and turned off the ignition.

The series of sudden, automatic motions apparently frightened the wasp.

It buzzed again, loudly, and came at the man's face.

He ducked and dodged.

"Listen, wasp," he said, half in jest, half in panic. "I don't have to take this from you. Behave yourself and nobody'll get hurt."

The wasp circled in the back of the car and came at the man again.

"Damn you!" he said, and used his leather briefcase to shield his face from the attack.

The angry buzzing became more furious. The man saw his chance and the briefcase squashed the wasp.

He picked up the dead insect by one wing and dropped it out the window.

THE END

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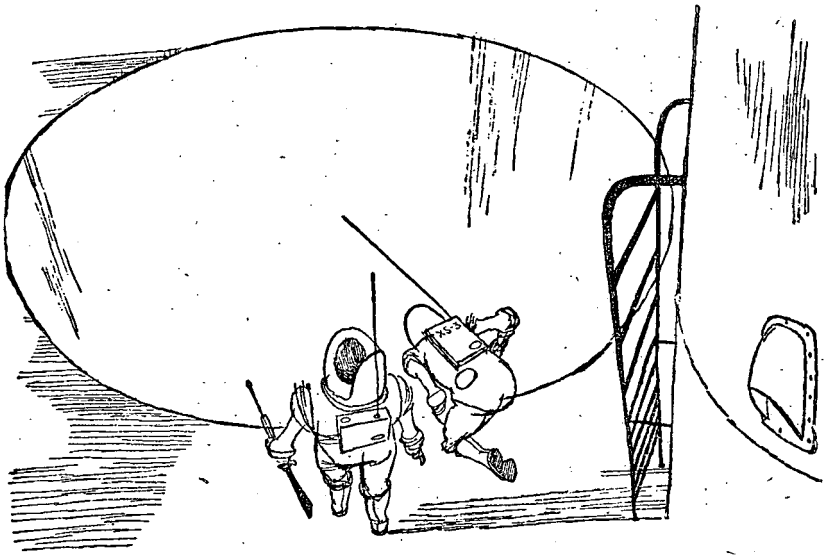

THE HOLES

By MICHAEL SHAARA

Obviously no human foot had ever trod this tiny planet. Nothing but sand and quiet desolation. Hardly worth the rocket fuel necessary to make a landing, thought the crew. But orders were to leave no floating hunk of galactic debris unexplored, and orders were meant to be obeyed.

That was when they discovered the holes. . . .

THE sand in the morning was soft and white. The sun was still low and the land was laced with shadows—long lean streaks of shadows—and in among the dark laces the hole stood out like a coal-black eye. It was perfectly round. The small gray ship that flew in from the west passed directly over it and came round in a wide circle. It fluttered back and forth nervously in the cool morning air. In the

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emptiness of the desert there was no motion, no sound. It settled down silently on a small white hill.

After a while two men came out of the ship, walked down cautiously through the sand to the rim of the hole. The first man, McCabe, was dark and beefy and bull-headed. The second, Royal, was very slim, with stiff scrubby hair like a desert tree. Royal was much more cautious than McCabe; he reached out to the big man and pulled him back from the edge.

McCabe grunted with annoyance.

"It's only a *hole,* Frank," he grumbled. "Don't be so damn jumpy."

"A hole with what in the bottom?" Royal said. "You hang your head over the edge you're liable to lose it. Get back."

McCabe backed off glumly. A slight, lean smile edged Royal's face. He bent down in the sand, picked up a large rock. With one hand at his holster, he tossed the rock carefully into the hole. He crouched tensely, waiting.

There was no sound.

Royal relaxed slowly. McCabe grinned at him. "You got nerves in your pants," McCabe said.

Royal nodded, not listening.

"When the rock fell," he said, "did you hear anything?"

McCabe looked blank.

"I don't recall," he said, "why?"

"I didn't," Royal said. "Not a thing. Must be pretty deep."

McCabe nodded, grinned again.

"Can I look down *now,* papa?"

Royal said nothing. Although to McCabe his great caution was often ridiculous, Royal did not allow himself to become bothered. He had been in the Mapping Command for eight years, and he was still alive. McCabe was new. In a little while, if he lived, he would begin to walk just as nervously as Royal, and perhaps with greater caution: and he would learn to expect the impossible. Alien worlds have alien rules, you either learn quickly or not at all. But McCabe was still green and fearless and although Royal did not like being saddled with a man like this, he did not dwell on it. He walked with McCabe to the rim of the hole.

McCabe whistled.

The hole fell straight down into blackness. It was perfectly round, perhaps fifteen feet across, and the sides were

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smooth. Remarkably smooth. The opening was sharp, even, with the sleek black roundness of a giant pipe.

"Deep son-of-a-gun," McCabe said. "What do you think it is?"

Royal shrugged. "If there was any life on this planet—which there isn't—I'd say it looked like the hole of a giant worm."

McCabe jumped, and it was Royal's turn to smile.

"No," he went on thoughtfully, "it's not animal. But not natural either. Too round. Do you happen to remember if perfect circles ever occur in nature?"

McCabe thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Neither do I," Royal said, "but we will proceed on the assumption that they don't. And now we will find out how deep this one is."

The half-smile returned to Royal's face. He found another rock.

"Listen carefully," he said, "and check your watch. Count off the time until you hear the rock hit bottom."

Royal reached out and held the rock as far as he could out over the center of the hole, then let it drop. It fell quickly out of sight.

McCabe counted.

There was no sound.

After five seconds they looked at each other.

After another few seconds McCabe stopped counting. There had been no sound at all.

"Soft bottom," Royal said. "I'll ricochet one off the walls."

He dropped another rock. They stood together and heard it fall, crashing back and forth from wall to wall, fading slowly beyond hearing. They did not hear it land.

"Son-of-a-*gun!*" McCabe grinned. "It's a couple of hundred feet, at least."

"At least," Royal said, "possibly more. And straight down."

It was very odd. There was nothing really weird or exciting about it, just a deep round hole in the ground, but still, it was very odd.

"Listen," Royal said suddenly, "I just want to check. There's a small single-beam radar unit in the scout sled. It's too big for me but you can handle it. Let's go."

He turned and ran up toward the ship. McCabe grunted after him, protesting. "What the hell for? What good is radar at a couple of hundred feet?"

"Suppose it's more than a

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couple of hundred feet?" Royal said.

McCabe didn't follow.

"Straight down?"

"Not likely. All the same it's worth a check." Royal reached the sled and began very quickly to unbolt the radar.

McCabe knelt down by him and argued. "Oh hell, Frank, why don't we go home? We're through here, all we got to do is take samples and go home. By golly, we've been out now for close to—"

Royal interrupted him abruptly, a thin hard line of tenseness in his voice.

"The sides are smooth," he said quietly. "Didn't you see that? Use your eyes, man, use your eyes. The sides are perfectly smooth. Haven't you ever heard of *erosion?*"

McCabe's mouth opened slightly, but he said nothing.

"It should rain on this planet pretty often," Royal said working carefully at the radar, "in this place it should rain at least every few months. When do you figure it rained last?"

Now McCabe got it. He looked up quickly into the blue-grey morning sky.

"A few months maybe," Royal said, heaving at the radar, "just a few months. Either the hole was dug just *days* ago or—" he paused, looked at McCabe with a wide, white smile—"or somebody's been keeping it clean."

"Holy Smoke!" McCabe murmured, stunned.

"We'll have to make a report," Royal said, "but first we'll find out how deep this thing is. When we find the depth, we may be able to figure the purpose. Why would somebody dig a hole, then keep it clean?"

He pushed the radar toward McCabe. The beefy man heaved it silently to his shoulder, carried it down the hill and set it up above the rim of the hole.

Royal turned it on and waited, watching the screen, playing one more round of the dark, lethal game which had been his life for eight years. He was expecting the hole to be deep, very deep, but even though he had lived with the impossible for many years, he could never have expected how really deep it was.

The radar screen stayed blank.

According to radar, the hole had no bottom.

When your life has depended for a long while upon machines—upon tubes and wires and gadgets of all kinds—you must come to trust these

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things as a part of yourself. Radar is a spaceman's eyes, his only infallible eyes. He does not consider the possibility of his instruments failing because he has seldom heard of them doing so. When defects occur they come at speeds beyond light, and a report on why you died can never be made.

But even though Royal took the radar apart and put it back together again and found nothing wrong, anywhere, he could not believe what the radar said. There could not possibly be a hole all the way through the planet. Temperature, pressure at the planet's core would be so tremendous that no open space could exist. But there was nothing wrong with the radar. A beam had gone down, it had not bounced back, and there was no conclusion that Royal could draw but that there was nothing in the hole to bounce back from.

"A *bead!*" McCabe wheezed, "whole damn planet's one great big bead!" His huge, merry voice roared in the empty morning air.

Royal, watching, did not laugh. Already a solution, and a fear, was forming within him. There was a thing in the hole which baffled radar, and which, from time to time, came out in the sun.

Royal stood up in the sand. He backed away from the hole, turned and walked quickly to the ship. In a few moments McCabe came chortling in, lugging the radar. The ship lifted.

"Home, James!" McCabe shouted happily, "I got to tell the boys—"

Royal paid no attention. He bent down over some maps. The ship turned in orbit—swung off toward the dark side of the planet.

McCabe objected at first, then understood.

"You sure are a thorough son-of-a-gun," McCabe said.

Ten hours later, as morning dawned on the opposite side of the planet, they stood upon rocks in a long low valley, gazing down at the second hole.

This one had no bottom either.

"Well, that's it," McCabe muttered in amazement. "It really by God *does* go all the way through!"

"Impossible," Royal said curtly. He had no intention of letting himself be thrown by this. "There's no material in the universe strong enough to open up a hole through the core of a planet."

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McCabe pointed wordlessly at the hole.

"Absorption," Royal said. He knelt down carefully over the hole. "There's something down there that absorbs. When the radar beam goes down, something attracts it, *absorbs* it. That would account for no signal returning."

McCabe thought for a moment.

"All right. Yeah. Sure. But there's two holes."

"There are probably a *lot* of holes," Royal said insistently, "all over the planet. There might be a hole in every open space, for all we know. We still don't know what causes the things. Maybe they're mining shafts. Maybe some aliens dropped by here a little while ago and sent down shafts looking for some kind of deep ore."

He was convincing neither McCabe, nor himself, and he knew it. But he went on. "And how do we know this hole is directly opposite the other one? We didn't calculate, did we? All we did was approximate the right area, and then we came over and looked around—"

"And we found another hole!" McCabe shouted. "Damn it, Frank, this is ridiculous!"

"There are other holes. There have to be other holes. We'll look."

"Where? The things are only a few feet across. We could look for ten years—"

Royal had begun to pace back and forth. "There must be a pattern. If it was mining, they probably dug at regular intervals. We'll look at the points halfway between the holes, then a third, then a quarter. All right?"

McCabe threw up his hands. "We could be here until winter."

Royal had stopped. He was looking now at the second hole. "Funny," he said.

"What?"

"The size of this hole. Wouldn't you say it was bigger than the other?"

McCabe looked.

"It is, by God! It's about twenty feet wide. The other was only fifteen."

"Let's measure to make sure."

They did. The second hole was bigger. Like everything else, that did not make any sense either.

They searched at regular intervals. They found no holes.

Royal was mystified.

A bead?

But there was no sense in searching any further. Millions upon millions of square

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miles of rock and sand and low bushy trees lay before them; in all that area there might be thousands of holes, but there was not much purpose in searching for them.

And then Royal had a brainstorm.

They flew up to the northern icecap. In the flat white ice of the north they looked, where holes would stand out like great blots. Altogether, before they stopped looking, they found seven holes.

None of them had a bottom. They lay in the snow with no pattern, some of them very close together, and if the number here was any clue then the rest of the planet was probably riddled with them. The biggest was almost forty feet across. There were others no larger than a foot. All bottomless.

Royal did not bother to check the other cap. He had no idea what to do now, but he could not leave. They flew back to the desert—to the first hole.

"It's animal," Royal said.

Night was coming on and the air of the desert was moist and cold. McCabe was standing near the rim of the hole, flapping his arms and grumbling. Royal waited quietly near him, watching the hole, thinking. He had waited long enough and all the while his instinct had been working, and now the pieces were falling in together. Royal smiled thinly.

"It's alive," he said.

McCabe jumped.

"What's alive?"

"The thing in the hole," Royal said. "Add it up. One: a signal goes down, no signal comes out. Therefore, the signal must have been absorbed. It *couldn't* have gone all the way through. Two: none of the holes show sign of erosion. All were dug recently, or are being kept clean."

He paused. In his mind it was very clear.

"Now," he went on softly, talking almost to himself, "suppose there is a thing down there that absorbs. That would account for the radar not coming back, and also for the lack of dirt if the things were dug recently. The thing ate its way down. From time to time—for air maybe—the thing comes back up. When it comes it widens the hole, smoothes it out."

McCabe shuddered.

"Man, you've got the biggest imagination in fourteen galaxies."

"Could it be?"

McCabe turned away. "Sure. But it looks to me like

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you need an explanation real bad, so you're just putting one together. What could live down there?"

"It would have to be very warm," Royal said.

After a moment McCabe whirled impatiently. "Look, Frank, for crying out loud, why don't we go home and let the techs figure this out. We been here long enough to—"

He broke off suddenly. He was staring at the hole.

"Frank."

Royal saw it too.

"It's bigger."

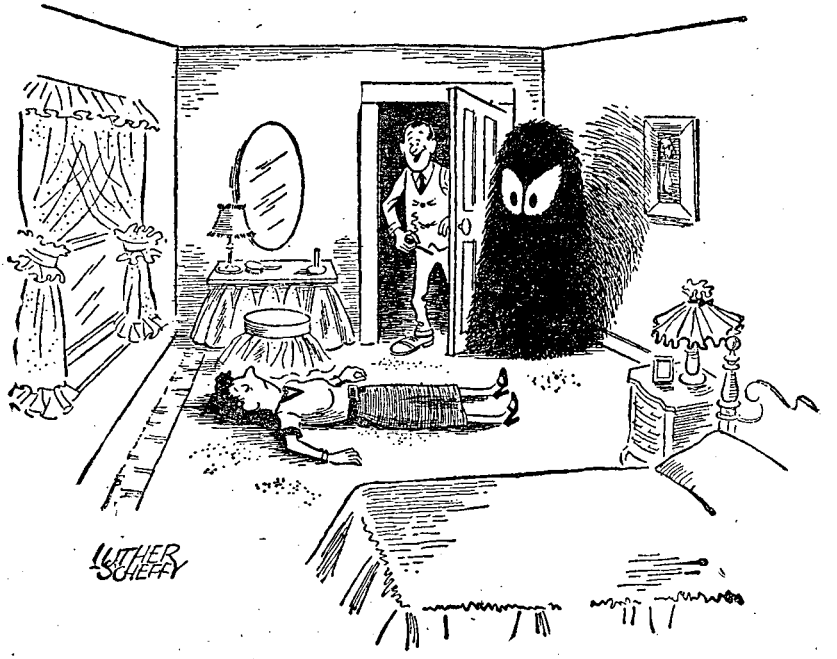
Royal stared at the hole.

"The damn thing is wider," McCabe said, awed. "It's *grown*."

Royal knelt quickly to the ground, ran his fingers through the sand.

"Look at the ground. It's—it's turning to dust."

McCabe was too big a man. When he turned suddenly to run his heels dug deep in the sand near the rim. The sand gave way. Suddenly, beneath



"Resting, dear?"

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his feet, the sand began crumbling and sliding down into the hole.

McCabe screamed.

Royal leaped back. In one huge agonized reach he caught McCabe's flailing hand. The sand, the dust slid quickly away. McCabe lay on his stomach with his feet falling down into the hole.

Royal set himself, heaved.

Desperately, his face flat and yellow and his eyes bulging white, McCabe clutched and clawed and inched back out of the hole. He pulled out the last few feet himself. Behind him the dust was still sliding softly, in a gray liquid sea.

They did not wait at the rim. They dashed headlong for the ship.

It ended in space, in the ship, with the black night velvet around them. It ended suddenly, and with the utmost horror, because they thought they were through and they lay back and rested.

McCabe sat numbly in the astrogation room, smoking a long white line of cigarettes. In his mind was a picture of himself falling, falling, down the long dark tunnel to the core of the planet. And then he fell a little way further, fell *up,* pushed by his own momentum, until gravity caught into him and sucked him back down, down again to the core and past, and then up and down, back and forth, falling forever in the black tunnel, a pendulum, human, screaming. McCabe sat smoking numbly.

Royal got ready to make out his report. Animal in origin. He sat at his desk, now. He had survived one more alien place, had come away with its secret. He chuckled aloud.

A few moments later he poured a cup of hot coffee. The steam scorched him and he put his numbed fingers to his mouth. Then he looked at his hand.

For a long, long terrible while, he looked at his hand.

Not an animal, he thought. Not an animal at all.

A disease.

He sat down to wait. He thought of writing a letter, or explaining in the log, but in a little while there would be no letter, no log, and there was nothing he could do. Nothing but sit and wait, and stare at the center of his palm—

—where the flesh turned to dust around a small black hole.

THE END

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"According to the book, he's the sensitive type."

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CAT'S CRADLE

By
LOUIS ESTE

Lillian was a pretty good cat as cats go. She figured she was entitled to something out of life. Nothing big, you understand, because she wasn't ambitious. She just wanted to belong.

SOMETIMES here in the Tujunga hills, when the moon rides high and fog whispers thinly through hedge and shrubbery, then creeping night things are stilled and a sort of dream reaches out and touches my cottage.

The magic was there a night ago. Stars sparked and bubbled from a moon of May wine, a crazy moon that made distant dissonant music.

Tired, I'd been reading and was ready for the sack, when a knock knuckled my door.

I waited, wondering.

The knock was repeated. I got up, unlatched the door and looked into the fog. Then I saw her, one foot resting on a step.

A cat.

I opened the door wide. She moved into the room and I closed the door. Just a cat she was. A moll. And, except for a sleazy reticule carried slung over a shoulder, there was nothing unusual about her.

She stood there, looking me over.

"Name's Lillian," she said.

I nodded, rolled a cigarette and moved to a window. The

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mist, frog-high, moved secretly in the night, and from the moon sounded the distant blare of a trombone, a scraped fiddle. Drums. Real crazy.

A cricket opened his yap, chirped once, caught his breath, and shut up. Sounded scared. I looked down at Lillian.

"Married?" she asked.

I shook my head, lit the cigarette.

She nodded knowingly, while her eyes nippered about the unswept room.

"A dopey question," she sniffed, but she seemed pleased. Then she reached into the reticule and hooked out a ball of yarn, a dried fish of some sort, and what appeared to be a snuff-box.

"Well," she said cosily, "here's you, and here's me. See what I mean?"

I shook my head.

"Look," she went on, "I'm a spinster, so called, with neither kith nor, because of an unfortunate sense of ethics, kit." She took up the yarn and began deftly knitting.

"What I mean, bachelor, do you need an able body to do for you?"

She dropped a stitch, purled one.

"I'm fixing to stay," she said.

The idea didn't seem—well—practical, and I told her so.

"Practical schmactical," she gruffled. "Every God-fearing home has a house cat. It's the American way."

She lowered her knitting and looked at me slantingly.

"You know what I mean when I say The American Way?" Her voice held capitals, and a hint of suspicion.

"I am not now," I began, "nor ever have been—"

"Let it skid," she cut in, "forget it. Anyway, there's plenty of things I can set myself to do around here. Practical things."

I must have looked doubtful.

"Can't, eh?" She held up her knitting. "Lookit, doll," she said. "Practical?"

I looked.

"Cat's cradle," she explained.

"What's it good for?"

"You'll see," she said smugly, and went on knitting.

The needles clicked busily. I didn't want a cat around. Any cat.

Lillian dropped another stitch, purled two.

"I can bring you herring," she offered, and purled several times.

I yawned again. "No herring."

"No herring?" she asked.

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"Nope."

"Everybody likes herring," she told me.

"Not everybody," I said.

A small worried frown settled between her eyes. She looked up.

"Brain food, you know."

"Cat food," I said.

"Not practical, eh?"

"Not at all practical."

She put her knitting down and began uneasily washing her paws.

"Even kippered?" she said desperately.

I sat on the bed and slid off a shoe.

"Good-bye, Lillian," I said.

Her shoulders sagged, and she stared unseeingly at the floor. After a long moment, she returned knitting and herring to her reticule, tightened the strap and moved wearily toward the door.

"Been making the rounds all night," she said, "and always the same story: failure. Guess I just knock at the wrong lousy houses." She opened the door a crack, and quickly closed it.

"Your bonds have matured, sir."

"Cold out." Her teeth chattered. "Freeze your damn tail off."

I nodded.

"Powerful east wind growling up. Looks stormy. Like rain. Maybe even—even lightning."

I nodded again.

"Sleet and hail, maybe snow. It's liable to come busting down like a bat out of hell." She shivered and pulled her furs closely to her.

I reminded her that she was in sunny California.

"Sunny California," she said bitterly. "The big-hearted, hospitable west. What a jungle!"

She leaned tiredly against the door her eyes half-hooded in thought. "Gotta study this caper out," she whispered. "I'm in a jam."

I slid off the other shoe.

Lillian reached into her reticule, hooked out the snuff-box and took a pinch of its contents.

"Catnip," she murmured,

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"it always bucks me up." She inhaled some of the stuff, and tapped the box.

"Know what's in there?" she asked.

"You just told me. Catnip."

"It's more than that. There're dreams there. A carnival of dreams. A Coney Island of dreams in three D, with a million lights and colors. It's loaded with plans, beautiful, impossible plans."

She reached into the reticule, brought out the yarn and needled it. Then she began knitting, knitting and pacing back and forth across the room, needles clicking sharply.

"Dreams," she whispered, and hiccupped softly. She staggered a bit, and clung to a chair for a moment. "The stuff's dynamite," she said, and resumed her pacing.

A wisp of fog squeezed in under the door.

"Mardi Gras," she husked. "Merry-go-rounds. There's a brass ring. A diamond studded brass ring. Grab on! Whoosh!" She was moving now just a bit erratically, and in circles. A chair tipped to the floor. Lillian giggled. The needles had lost their steady beat.

I'd dozed off, I suppose, for when next I looked toward Lillian she was stretched out between two chairs in a sort of cat's cradle. Her eyes seemed crossed.

"How's it, doll?" she said, and hiccupped.

"Crowded," I told her.

"You don't have to say that again."

She held up a small something by the tail.

"Tell me I ain't got a job, a *practical* job to do here. Go on, tell me. Look."

I looked.

"Light mousework," she explained.

I'm looking at Lillian now. Over there in her cradle, eyes catnip-drenched, she's purring blowsily, "Come ona my housh, my housha (hic) come on . . ."

Thinks she's Rosemary Clooney.

THE END

"But my wife *is* a civilian!"

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—continued from back cover

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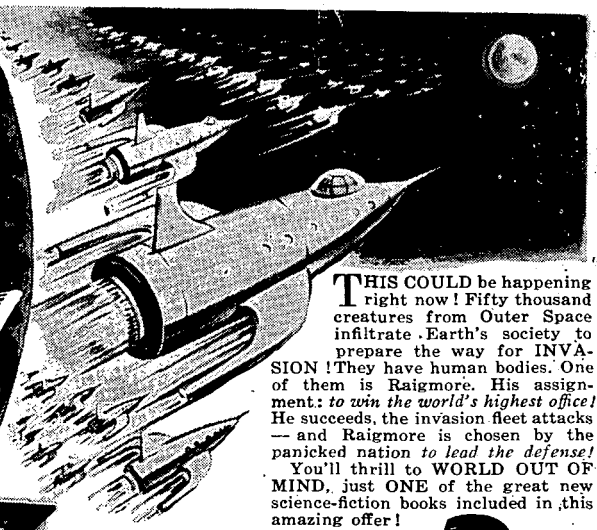

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